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THEY WRITE...

TOM KNOTH

"I was born in Hamburg 30 years ago. My mother was an American, my father a German, also a painter. Educated in Germany, where I later studied art at the Academies of Hamburg and Berlin. After the war I returned to painting, exhibiting my work in Hanover and Munich. Did magazine and newspaper illustration to support myself, followed by an interim in Paris on a scholarship. Arrived in Manhattan last summer with my wife and child. Am now illustrating again and enjoying every minute of it."

RALPH ROBIN

"Born in Pittsburgh. List of various occupations runs like this: copyboy, materials inspector, analytical chemist, army officer, building technologist, research chemist, and writer. Will stick to the last until the editors, as a group, say 'Down, boy. That'll be all.' Hope this never happens because my typewriter wouldn't bring much at Uncle Joe's."

THEODORE STURGEON

"Sturgeon? Who cares about that guy? But science—fiction and fantasy—that's something else again. I got interested in these fields at a very early age. Later, I was impressed by the fact that practically every great author has—at one time or another—done a piece of fantasy. You name the writer—I'll name the story. Science-fiction, while not old enough as a genre, to rate the interest of too many greats, is solidly established. But it will, chum, it will."

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CONTENTS

CONFIDENCE TRICK
By John Wyndham..... 4

FOUR MEN AND A SUITCASE
By Ralph Robin..... 20

OPERATION MIND PICK
By William P. McGivern..... 28

DON'T TAKE IT TO HEART
By H. L. Gold..... 62

THE GLASSES
By Charles Larson..... 70

THE WISHING STONE
By Ivar Jorgensen..... 80

THE MAGIC ENDS AT MIDNIGHT
By Robert Terrall..... 90

THE DARK ROOM
By Theodore Sturgeon..... 104

THE ALTAR
By Robert Sheckley..... 142

CLASSIC SHORT STORY

THE MAN WHO LIKED DICKENS
By Evelyn Waugh..... 149

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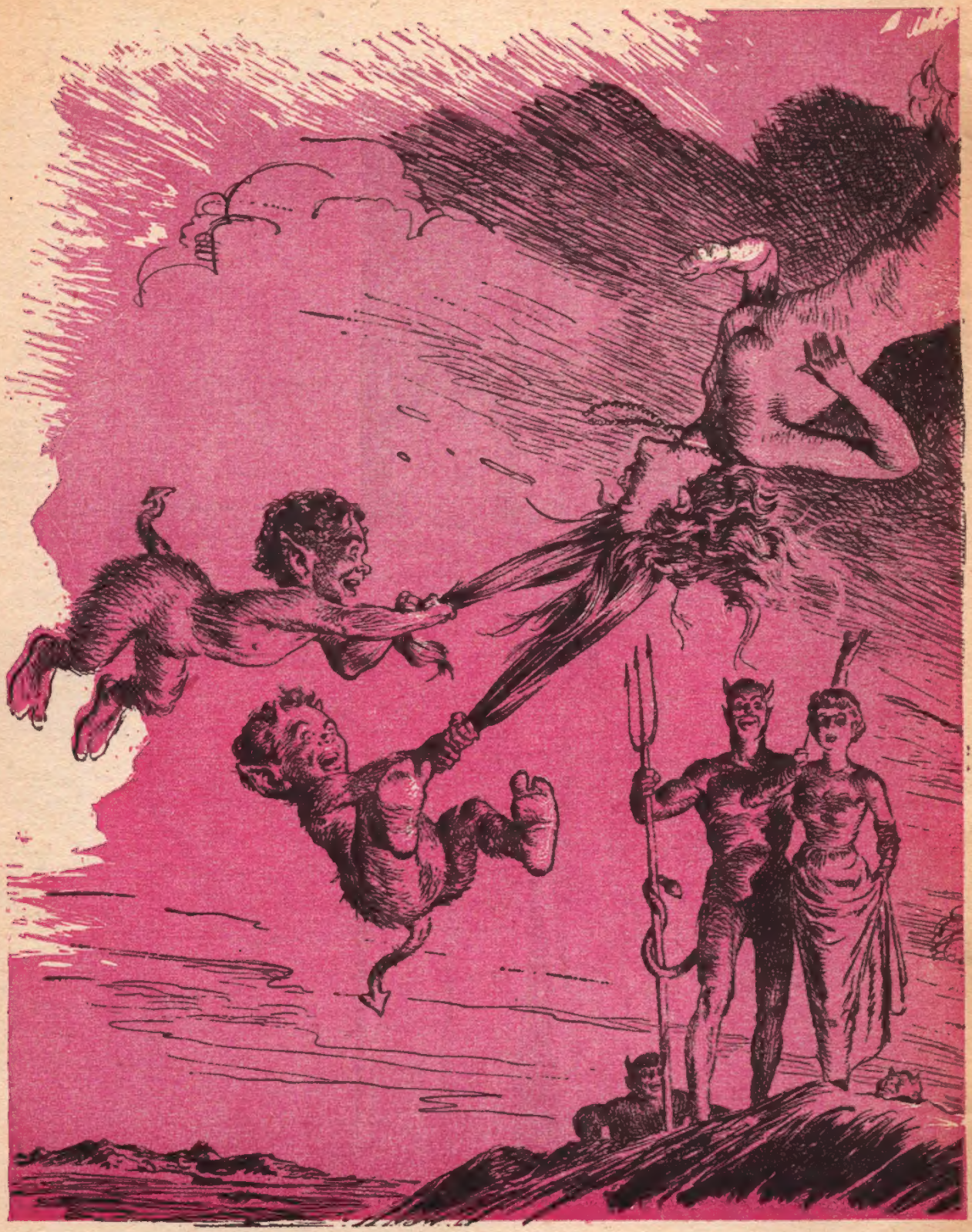
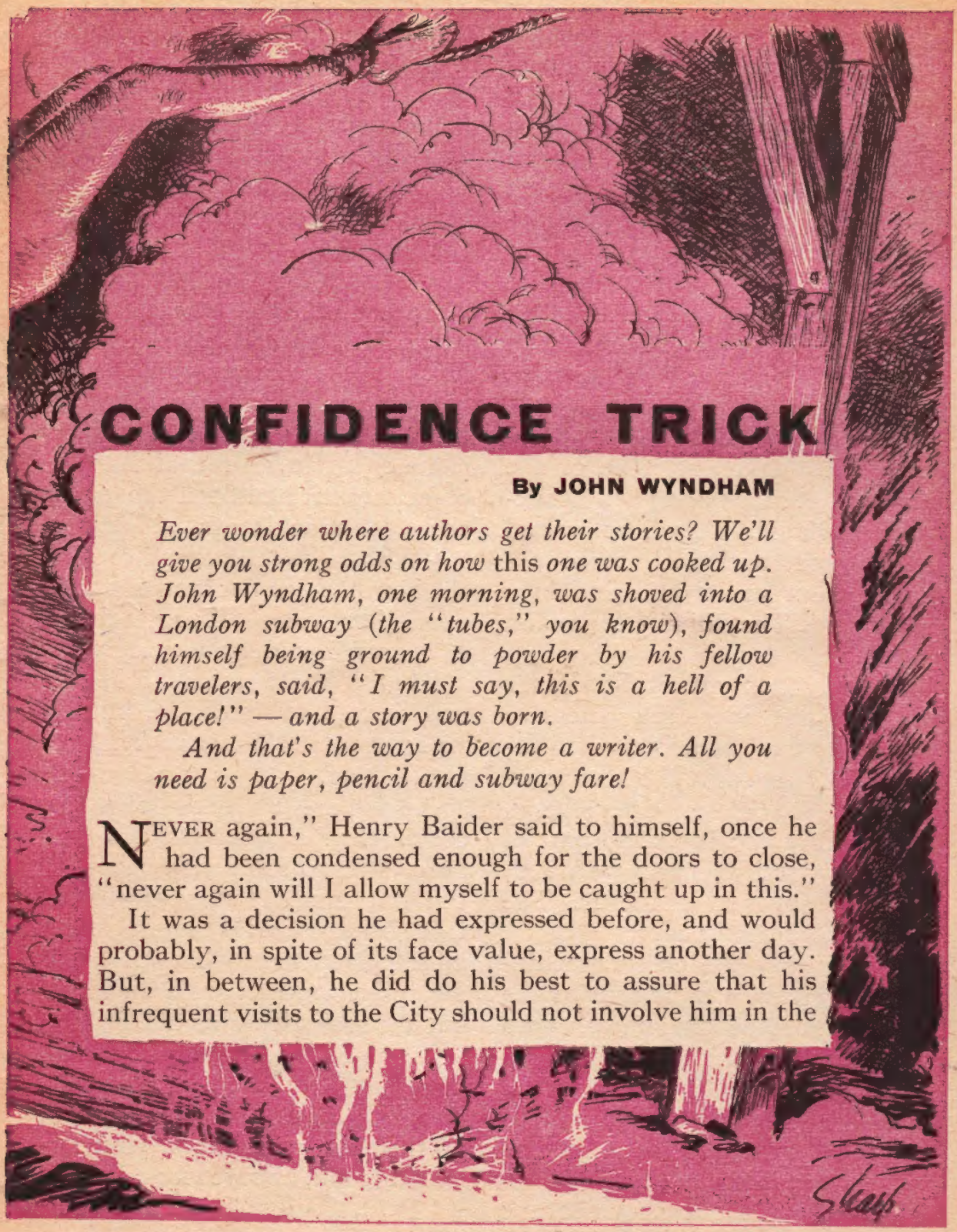




CONFIDENCE TRICK

By JOHN WYNDHAM

Ever wonder where authors get their stories? We'll give you strong odds on how this *one was cooked up. John Wyndham, one morning, was shoved into a London subway (the "tubes," you know), found himself being ground to powder by his fellow travelers, said, "I must say, this is a hell of a place!" — and a story was born.*

And that's the way to become a writer. All you need is paper, pencil and subway fare!

"NEVER again," Henry Baider said to himself, once he had been condensed enough for the doors to close, "never again will I allow myself to be caught up in this."

It was a decision he had expressed before, and would probably, in spite of its face value, express another day. But, in between, he did do his best to assure that his infrequent visits to the City should not involve him in the

rush hour. Today, however, already delayed by his business, he faced the alternatives of vexing his wife by delaying still further, or of allowing himself to be drawn into the flood that was being sucked down the Bank Station entrances. After looking unhappily at the moving mass and then at the unmoving bus queues, he had squared his shoulders. "After all, they do it twice a day and survive. Who am I —?" he said, and stepped stoutly forward.

The funny thing was that nobody else looked as if he or she thought it a sub-human, stockyard business. They just waited blank-eyed, and with more patience than you would find in a stockyard. They didn't complain, either.

Nobody got out at St. Paul's though the increased pressure suggested that somebody had inexplicably got in. The doors attempted to close, drew back, presumably because some part of somebody was inexpertly stowed, tried again, and made it. The train drew heavily on.

The girl in the green mackintosh on Henry's right said to the girl in the blue mackintosh who was jammed against her: "D'you think you actually *know* when your ribs crack?" but on a philosophical note of fair comment rather than complaint.

Nobody got out at Chancery Lane, either. A lot of exhortation, shoving and staggering achieved the impossible: somebody more was aboard. The train picked up speed slowly. It rattled on for a few seconds. Then there was a jolt and all the lights went out.

Henry swore at his luck as the train drew up, but then, almost the instant it had stopped, it started to pull again. Abruptly he discovered that he was no longer supported by the people round him, and flung out an arm to save himself. It struck something yielding. At that moment the lights came on again, to reveal that the object struck had been the girl in the green mackintosh.

"Who do you think you're —?" she began. Then her mouth stayed open, her voice failed, and her eyes grew rounder and wider.

At the same moment Henry had started to apologize, but his voice, too, cut out, and his eyes also bulged.

He looked up and down the coach that a moment ago had been jammed solid with people to the last inch. It now contained three others besides themselves. A middle-aged man who was opening his newspaper with an air of having been given his due at last; opposite him a woman, also middle-aged, and lost in contemplation; at the other end of the coach, in the last seat, sat a younger-looking man, apparently asleep.

"Well, really!" said the girl. "That Milly! Just wait till I see

her in the morning. She knows I have to change at Holborn, too. Getting off and leaving me without a word!" She paused. "It *was* Holborn, wasn't it?" she added.

Henry was still looking dazedly about him. She took hold of his arm and shook it.

"It *was* Holborn, wasn't it?" she repeated, uncertainly.

Henry turned to look at her, but still with a vagueness in his manner.

"Er . . . what was Holborn?" he asked.

"That last stop — where they all got out. It *must've* been Holborn, mustn't it?"

"I . . . er . . . I'm afraid I don't know this line well," Henry told her.

"I do. Like the back of my hand. Couldn't be anywhere but Holborn," she said, with self-convincing firmness.

Henry looked up the swaying coach, past the rows of strap-handles emptily aswing.

"I . . . er . . . didn't see any station," he said.

Her head in its red knitted cap tilted further back to look up at him. Her blue eyes were troubled, though not alarmed.

"Of course there was a station — or where would they all go to?"

"Yes . . ." said Henry. "Yes, of course."

There was a pause. The train continued to speed along, swaying more and jerking more now on its lightly loaded springs.

"The next'll be Tottenham Court Road," said the girl, though with a touch of uneasiness.

The train rattled. She stared at the black windows, growing more pensive.

"Funny," she said, after a while. "Funny-peculiar, I mean."

"Look here," said Henry. "Suppose we go and have a word with those people up there. They might know something."

The girl glanced along. Her expression showed no great hopes of them, but: "All right," she said, and turned to lead the way.

Henry stopped opposite the middle-aged woman. She was dressed in a well-cut coat surmounted by a fur cape. An inch or two of veil fringed the round hat on her carefully dressed dark hair; her shoes, on the end of almost invisible nylon stockings, were black patent-leather with elegant heels; both her gloved hands rested on the black leather bag on her lap as she sat in absent contemplation.

"I beg your pardon," said Henry, "but could you tell us the name of the last station — the one where all the other people got out?"

The lids rose slowly. The eyes regarded him through the fringe

of veil. There was a pause during which she appeared to consider the several reasons which could have led such a person as Henry to address her, and to select the most becoming. Henry decided that no-longer-young was perhaps more apposite than middle-aged.

"No," she said, with a slight smile which did not touch the matter. "I'm afraid I didn't notice."

"It didn't strike you that there was anything . . . odd about it?" Henry suggested.

The lady's well-marked eyebrows rose slightly. The eyes pondered him on two or three levels.

"Odd?" she inquired.

"The way they all went so very quickly," he explained.

"Oh, was that unusual?" said the lady. "It seemed to me a very good thing; there were far too many of them."

"Quite," agreed Henry, "but what is puzzling us is how it happened."

The eyebrows rose a little higher. "Really. I don't think I can be expected to —"

There was a harrumph noise, and a rustling of newspaper behind Henry. A voice said: "Young man. It doesn't seem to me to be necessary for you to bother this lady with the matter. If you have any complaints, there are proper channels for them."

Henry turned. The speaker was a man with graying hair, and a well-trimmed moustache set on a pinkly healthy face. He was aged perhaps fifty-five and dressed City-*comme-il-faut* from black Homburg to dispatch case. At the moment he was glancing interrogatively towards the lady, and receiving a small, grateful smile in return. Then his eyes met Henry's. His manner changed slightly; evidently Henry was not quite the type that his back view had suggested.

"I am sorry," Henry told him, "but this young lady may have missed her station. Besides, it does seem rather odd."

"I noticed Chancery Lane, so the rest must have got out at Holborn — that is obvious, surely," said the man.

"But they went so quickly."

"A good thing too. The people in charge must have found some new method of handling the traffic. They're always developing new ideas and techniques, you know — even under public ownership."

"But we've been going on for nearly ten minutes, non-stop, since then, and we've certainly not passed a station," Henry objected.

"Probably been re-routed. Technical reasons, I expect," said the man.

"Re-routed! On the underground?" protested Henry.

"My dear fellow, it's not my job to know how these things

work — nor yours, I take it. We have to leave it to those who do. That's what they're there for, after all. Take it from me, they know what they're up to, even though it may seem 'odd,' as you call it, to us. God bless me, if we don't have faith in our expert authorities, where are we?"

Henry looked at the girl in the green mackintosh. She looked back at him. She shrugged slightly. They went and sat down, further up the coach. Henry glanced at his watch, offered her a cigarette, and they both lit up.

The train rattled along to a steady rhythm. Both of them watched the windows for the sight of a lighted platform, but they could see no more than their own reflections against outside blackness. When there was no more of the cigarette to hold, Henry dropped the remains on the floor and ground it out. He looked at his watch again, then at the girl.

"More than twenty minutes," he said. "That's impossibility, raised several powers."

"It's going faster now, too," the girl observed. "And look at the way it's tilted."

Henry regarded the hanging straps. There could be no doubt that they were running down an appreciable incline. Glancing forward, he saw that the other couple was now in quite animated conversation.

"Shall we try them again?" he suggested.

"— never more than fifteen minutes, even in the rush hour. Absolutely never," the lady was saying as they came up. "I'm afraid my husband will be so worried about me."

"Well?" inquired Henry, of the man.

"Certainly very unusual," the other conceded.

"Unusual! Nearly half an hour at full bat without a station? It's absolutely impossible," said Henry.

The other regarded him coldly.

"It is clearly *not* impossible because it is being demonstrated right now. Very likely this is some underground escape-route from London that they constructed during the war, and we have been switched on to it in error. I have no doubt that the authorities will presently discover the mistake and bring us back."

"Taking them a long time," said the girl. "Due home before this, I am. And I got a date at the Pallay this evening."

"We'd better stop the train," said the lady. Her eyes were on the handle, with its notice that threatened £5 for improper use.

Henry and the other man looked at one another.

"Well, if this isn't an emergency, what is?" demanded the lady.

"Er . . ." said Henry.

"The authorities —" the other began.

"All right," she announced. "If you men are afraid to touch it, I'm not." She reached up, took firm hold of the handle, and yanked it down.

Henry dropped into a seat quickly, pulling the girl down too before the brakes should go on.

The brakes did not go on.

They sat waiting. Presently it became a fair bet that the brakes were not going to go on. The lady pushed the handle up impatiently and pulled it down again. Nothing happened. She expressed her opinion of it.

"Cor! Listen to her! Did you ever?" said the girl beside Henry.

"Fluent. Have another cigarette," said Henry.

The train clattered and swayed along, the straps still hanging with a forward slant.

"Well," said the girl, after a time, "this properly dishes my date at the Pallay all right. Now that Doris'll get him. D'you think I could sue them?"

"I'm afraid not," Henry told her.

"You a lawyer?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, yes. Suppose we introduce ourselves. It looks as if we shall have to spend some time here, whatever they do. I'm Henry Baider."

"Mine's Norma Palmer," said the girl.

The City man said: "Robert Forkett," and nodded slightly to them.

"Barbara Branton — Mrs., of course," said the lady.

"What about him?" asked Norma, pointing to the man at the far end of the coach. "D'you think we ought to wake him, and tell him?"

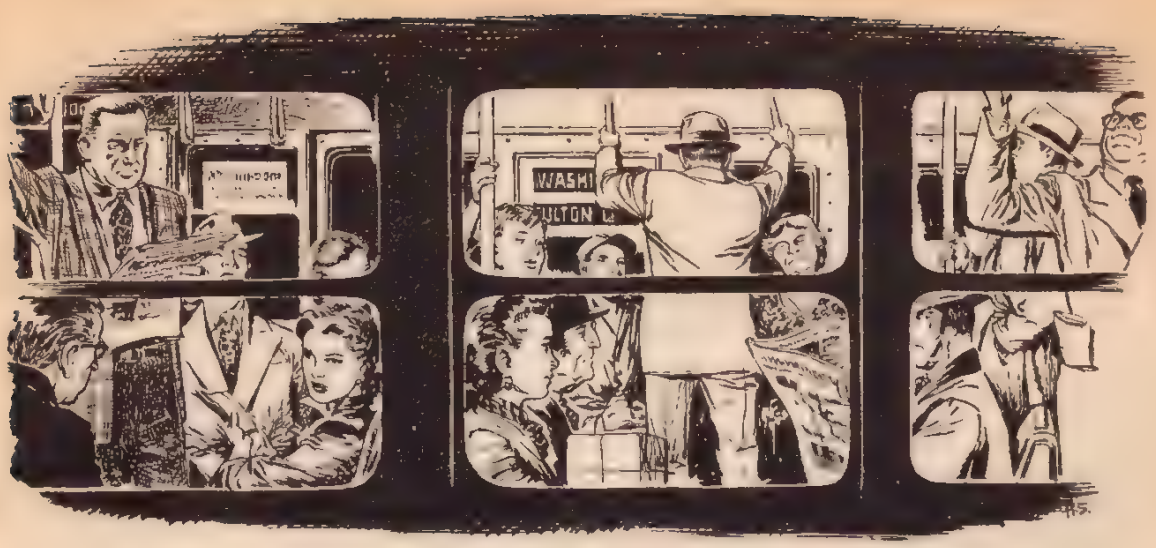
"I don't fancy it would help much," said Mr. Forkett. He turned to Henry. "I understood you to say you were a legal man, sir. Perhaps you can tell us just what our position is in this matter?"

"Well, speaking without my references," Henry told him, "I should say that in the matter of delay, no claim by us would lie. I think we shall find that the Company only undertakes to provide . . ."

Half an hour later he became aware of a weight pressing lightly against him. Looking round, he found that Norma had gone to sleep with her head on his shoulder. Mrs. Branton, on the other side, had also dozed off. Mr. Forkett yawned and apologized.

"Might as well all have a nap to pass the time, though," he suggested.

Henry looked at his watch once more. Practically an hour and a half now. Unless they had been going in a closed circle, they must have passed beneath several counties by this time. The thing



remained incomprehensible.

To reach a cigarette he would have had to disturb the girl, so he remained as he was, looking at the blackness outside, swaying slightly to the train's motion, listening to the ti-tocketty-tock, ti-tocketty-tock, ti-tocketty-tock, of the hurrying wheels until his head drooped sideways and rested on the knitted cap on his shoulder.

The change of rhythm, the slight shuddering from the brakes brought Henry awake; the rest stirred a moment later. Mr. Forkett yawned audibly. Norma opened her eyes, blinked at the unexpected scene, and discovered the situation of her head. She sat up. "Well, I never," she said, regarding Henry. He assured her it had been a pleasure. She began to pat her hair and correct herself according to her reflection in the still dark window opposite. Mrs. Branton reached under her cape and consulted a fob-watch.

"Nearly midnight. My husband'll be quite frantic."

The sounds of slowing continued to descend the scale. Presently the windows ceased to be altogether black; a light, rather pinkish compared with the lamps inside, started to show, and gradually to grow stronger.

"That's better," said Norma. "I always hate this tunnel."

The light grew brighter still, the speed dwindled, and presently they were running into a station. They leaned forward to catch the name, but could see no plate on the wall. Mrs. Branton, on the other side, suddenly craned across.

"There!" she said. They turned quickly, but not soon enough.

"It was something Avenue, or Avenue something," she said.

"Well, we'll soon find out now," Mr. Forkett reassured them.

The train drew up, with a sigh from the braking system, but the doors did not open at once. There

was a sound of echoing commotion further along the platform, out of which voices presently distinguished themselves calling: "All change!" — "End of the line!" — "All out here!"

"All very well — all change, indeed!" murmured Norma, getting up and moving towards the doors.

The others followed her. Quite suddenly the doors ran back. Norma gave one look at the figure standing on the platform.

"Ee-ow!" she yelped, and backed violently into Henry.

The figure wore little clothing. What there was seemed to be chiefly straps holding appurtenances, so that it was revealed as angularly male, in a rich mahogany red. Ethnologically, perhaps, the face might have been North American Indian, only instead of feathers it wore a pair of horns. Its right hand carried a trident; its left dangled a net.

"All out!" it said, moving a little aside.

Norma hesitated, then scuttled past it. The others followed warily but more sedately, and joined her on the platform. The creature leant into the open doorway, and they were able to observe his back view. The tail was waving with a slow, absent-minded kind of motion. The barb at the end of it looked viciously sharp.

"Er . . ." began Mr. Forkett. Then he changed his mind. He cast a speculative eye on each of his companions in turn, and pondered.

The creature caught sight of the sleeper at the other end of the car. He walked down and prodded him with his trident. There was some inaudible altercation. The creature prodded a few more times, and presently the man came out to join them, with the sleep not yet out of his eyes.

There was a shout higher up the platform, followed by a sound of running feet. A tough-looking young man came sprinting towards them. A net whistled after him and entangled him so that he fell and rolled over and over. A hearty shout of laughter came from the other end of the platform.

Henry glanced about. The dim rosy light was strong enough for him to see and read the station's nameplate.

"Something Avenue!" he repeated under his breath. "Tch-tch!"

Mrs. Branton overheard him, and looked at it.

"Well, if that doesn't spell 'Avenue,' what does it spell?" she demanded.

Before he could reply a voice began to call: "This way out! This way out!" and the creature motioned them on, with its trident at the ready. The young man from the other end of the coach

walked next to Henry. He was a large, forceful, intellectual-looking young man, but still not quite clear of the mists of sleep.

"What is all this nonsense about?" he said. "Collecting for the hospitals or something? No excuse for it, now we've got the Health Scheme."

"I don't think so," Henry told him, "in fact, I'm afraid it doesn't look too good." He indicated the station nameplate. "Besides," he added, "those tails — I don't see how it could be done."

The young man studied the sinuous movements of one of the tails.

"But really . . .!" he protested.

"What else?" inquired Henry.

Altogether, and exclusive of the staff, there were about a dozen people collected at the barrier. They were passed through one by one while an elderly demon in a small hutch checked them off on a list. Henry learnt that the large young man was entered as Christopher Watts, physicist.

Beyond the barrier was an escalator of a somewhat antiquated type It moved slowly enough for one to read the advertisements at the sides: preponderantly they offered specifics for burns, cuts, abrasions and bruises, with here and there the recommendation of a particular tonic or pick-me-up.

At the top stood an ill-used looking demon with a tray of tin boxes suspended against his chest. He was saying monotonously: "All guaranteed. Best quality." Mr. Forkett who was in front of Henry caught sight of the card on the tray, and stopped abruptly. The lettering ran:

FIRST-AID KITS COMPLETE
each
£1 or $1.50 (U.S.)

"That's an insult to the pound," Mr. Forkett announced indignantly.

The demon looked at Mr. Forkett. He thrust his face forward aggressively. "So what?" he demanded.

Pressure of those behind pushed Mr. Forkett on, but he moved reluctantly, murmuring about the necessity for confidence, stability and faith in sterling.

After crossing a hall they passed into the open. There was a faint tang of sulphur in the air. Norma pulled on the hood of her mackintosh against the light drizzle of cinders. Trident-bearers shepherded them round to the right, into a wire-netted enclosure. Three or four demons followed in with them. The last paused to speak to the guard on the gate.

"Heaven's harps, is that celestial bus behind time again?" he asked resentfully.

"Is it ever *on* time nowadays?" the gate-demon asked.

"Never used to have these

holdups when the old man was running his ferry," grumbled the guard.

"Individual enterprise, that was," said the gate demon, with a shrug.

Henry joined the others who were surveying the scene. The view to the right was rugged and extensive, though smoky. Far away, at the end of a long valley, could be seen a brightly glowing area in which large bubbles formed, rose slowly, and took tantalizingly long to burst. To the left of it a geyser of flame whooshed up intermittently. At the back right a volcano smoked steadily, while little streams of red hot lava trickled down from its rim. In the middle distance the valley walls narrowed in two towering crags. The one on the left bore the illuminated sign: TRY HOOPER'S HIDEHARD. The other proclaimed: UNBURN IS THE ANSWER.

A little short of the right-hand crag, on the level valley floor, was a square encampment surrounded by several fences of barbed wire, and overlooked by a guard tower at each corner. Every now and then a string of flaming arrows would fly tracer-like into the compound from one of the towers, and the sound of howls mixed with demonic laughter would be borne faintly on the sulphurous breeze. From that point one was able to follow the road as it wound up and past them to the station entrance. A building opposite the station appeared to be a barracks where demons were queueing up to sharpen their tridents and touch up their tail-barbs on a grindstone in the yard. The whole thing struck Henry as somewhat conventional.

Almost opposite their netted enclosure was a kind of gibbet. It was occupied at the moment by a lady with nothing on who was hanging suspended upside down from chains round her ankles while a couple of junior demons swung on her hair. Mrs. Branton searched in her bag, and found a pair of spectacles.

"Dear me! Surely not . . ." she murmured. She looked more carefully. "So difficult to tell that way up, and with the tears running into her hair. I'm afraid it is, though. Such a nice woman, I always thought, too."

She turned to the nearest demon. "Did she commit a murder, or something dreadful?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No," he said. "She just nagged at her husband so that he would find another woman and she would be able to divorce him for the alimony."

"Oh," said Mrs. Branton, a little flatly. "Is that all? I mean, there must have been something more serious, surely?"

"No," said the guard.

Mrs. Branton remained thoughtful. "Does she have to do a lot of that?" she asked, with a trace of uneasiness.

"Wednesdays," said the guard. "She does other things other days."

"Pss-t!" a voice hissed suddenly in Henry's ear. One of the guard demons beckoned him aside.

"Want to buy a bit of the real stuff?" inquired the demon.

"What stuff?" Henry asked.

The demon brought his hand out of his pouch. He opened it and showed a metal tube which looked as if it might contain toothpaste. He leant closer.

"The goods, this is. Best analgaesic cream on the whitemarket. Just rub it on every time before tortures — you'll not feel a thing."

"No, thank you. As a matter of fact, I think they'll probably find there's been a mistake in my case," Henry told him.

"Come off it, chum," said the demon. "Look. I'll take a couple of pounds — special to you, that is."

"No thanks," said Henry.

The demon frowned. "You'd better," he advised, shifting his tail into a threatening position.

"Well — one pound," said Henry.

The demon looked a little surprised. "Okay. It's yours," he said, and handed it over.

When Henry rejoined the group, he found most of them watching three demons exuberantly chasing an extensive, pink middle-aged man up the opposite mountainside. Mr. Forkett, however, was reviewing the situation.

"The accident," he said, raising his voice a little to contend with the increased lowing of sinners in the concentration camp, "the accident must have occurred between Chancery Lane and Holborn stations, that's fairly clear, I think. What is not at all clear to me, however, is why *I* am *here*. Undoubtedly, there has been a departmental error in my case which I hope will be rectified soon." He looked speculatively at the rest. Everyone became thoughtful.

"It'd have to be a *big* thing, wouldn't it?" asked Norma. "I mean, they wouldn't send a person here for a little thing like a pair of nylons, would they?"

"Well, if it was only *one* pair of nylons —" Henry was beginning, but he was cut short by an exclamation from Mrs. Branton. Following her gaze, he saw a woman coming down the street in a magnificent fur coat.

"Perhaps this place has another side to it that we've not seen yet," she suggested hopefully. "After all, where there are mink coats —"

"She doesn't look very pleased with it, though," Norma re-

marked, as the woman came closer.

"Live minks. Very sharp teeth," observed one of the demons, helpfully.

There was a sudden, startling yelp behind them. They turned to observe the dark young man, Christopher Watts, in the act of twisting a demon's tail. The demon yelped again, and dropped the tube of analgaesic cream it had been offering him. It attempted a stab with its trident.

"Oh, no, you don't!" said Mr. Watts, skillfully avoiding the thrust.

He caught the trident by the shaft and wrenched it out of the demon's hand. "Now!" he said with satisfaction. He dropped the trident and laid hold of the tail with both hands. He swung the demon twice round his head and let go. The demon flew over the wire-netting fence and landed in the road with a yell and a bump. The other demons deployed and began to advance upon Mr. Watts, tridents levelled, nets swinging in their left hands.

Christopher Watts squared up to them, grimly watching them come on. Then, suddenly, his expression changed. His frown gave place to a smile. He unclenched his fists and dropped his hands to his sides.

"Dear me, what nonsense all this is!" he said, and turned his back on the demons.

They stopped abruptly and looked confused.

A surprising sense of revelation came over Henry. He saw quite clearly that the young man was right. It *was* nonsense. He laughed at the bewildered look on the demons' faces, and heard Norma beside him laughing too. Presently, all the party was laughing at the discomforted demons who looked first apprehensive, then sheepish.

Mr. Christopher Watts strode across to the side of the enclosure which faced up the valley. For some moments he regarded the smoky, luridly somber view. Then: "I don't believe it!" he said quietly.

An enormous bubble rose and burst in the fiery lake. There was a *woomph!* as the volcano sent up a mushroom cloud of smoke and cinders, and spilt better, brighter streams of lava down its sides. The ground trembled a little under their feet. Mr. Watts drew a deep breath.

"*I DON'T BELIEVE IT!*" he said loudly.

There was a loud crack. The dizzy crag which bore the recommendation for UNBURN split off and toppled slowly into the valley. Demons on the mountain side dropped their hunting, and started to lope homewards with cries of panic. The ground shook violently. The fiery lake began to empty into a huge split which had

opened in the valley floor. A tremendous gush of flame burst from the geyser. The mighty crag on the other side heeled over. There was a roaring and a crashing and a hissing of steam all around them, and through it Mr. Watts' voice bawled again:

"I DON'T BELIEVE IT!!"

Suddenly, all was quiet, as if it had been switched off. All was black, too, with nothing whatever to be seen but the lighted windows of the train where it stood on the embankment behind them.

"Well," said Mr. Watts, on a note of cheerful satisfaction. "Well, that's that. Now let's go home again, shall we?" And by the light from the train windows he began to scramble up the embankment.

Henry and Norma moved to follow him. Mr. Forkett hesitated.

"What's the matter?" Henry asked him, looking back.

"I'm not sure. I feel it's not quite . . . not quite . . ."

"You can't very well stay here now," Henry pointed out.

"No — no, I suppose not," Mr. Forkett admitted and, half-reluctantly, he too began to climb the embankment.

Without any spoken agreement, the five who had previously travelled together again chose a coach to themselves. They had scarcely got aboard when the doors closed and the train began to move. Norma sighed with relief and pushed her hood back as she sat down.

"Like being halfway home already," she said. "Thank you ever so much, Mr. Watts. It's been a real lesson to me, it has, though. I'll never go near a stocking counter again, never — except when I'm going to buy some."

"I'll second that — the thanks part, I mean," said Henry. "I still feel that there was very likely some confusion between the legal and the common view in my particular case, but I'm extremely obliged to you for . . . er . . . cutting the red tape."

Mrs. Branton held out a gloved hand to Mr. Watts. "Of course, you'll realize that it was all a stupid mistake that I should be there, but I expect you've saved me hours and hours of dealing with ridiculous officials. I do hope you may be able to come and dine with us some time. I'm sure my husband will want to thank you personally."

There was a pause. It lengthened. Gradually the realization that Mr. Forkett was not taking his cue drew all their eyes upon him. He himself was gazing in a pensive way at the floor. Presently he looked up, first at them, and then at Christopher Watts.

"No," he said. "I am sorry, but I cannot agree. I am afraid I must continue to regard your ac-

tion as anti-social, if not actually subversive."

Mr. Watts, who had been looking rather pleased with himself, showed first surprise, then a frown.

"I beg your pardon?" he said with genuine puzzlement.

"You've done a very serious thing," Mr. Forkett told him. "There simply cannot be any stability if we do not respect our institutions. You, young man, have destroyed one. We all had confidence in this affair — even you, to begin with — then you suddenly go and break it all up, an institution of considerable standing, too. No, I really cannot be expected to approve of that."

The rest of them stared at him.

"But Mr. Forkett," said Norma, "surely you wouldn't rather be back there, with all those demons and things?"

"My dear young lady, that is scarcely the point," Mr. Forkett reproved her. "As a responsible citizen, I must strongly oppose anything that threatens to undermine public confidence. Therefore, I must regard this young man's action as dangerous; verging, I repeat, upon the subversive."

"But if an institution is phony —" began Mr. Watts.

"That too, sir, is beside the point. If enough people believe in an institution, then it is important to those people — whether it is what you call phony or not."

"You prefer faith to truth?" said Mr. Watts scornfully.

"You must have confidence, and if you have that, truth follows," said Mr. Forkett.

"As a scientist, I consider you quite immoral," said Mr. Watts.

"As a citizen, I consider you unscrupulous," said Mr. Forkett.

"Oh, dear!" said Norma.

Mr. Forkett pondered. Mr. Watts frowned.

"Something that is *real* isn't going to fall to bits just because I disbelieve in it," observed Mr. Watts.

"How can you tell? The Roman Empire was real enough once — as long as people believed in it," replied Mr. Forkett.

The argument continued for some little time, with Mr. Forkett growing more monumental, and Mr. Watts more fundamental.

Finally Mr. Forkett summed up his opinion: "Frankly, your iconoclastic, revolutionary views seem to me to differ only in name from bolshevism."

Mr. Watts rose to his feet. "The consolidation of society on faith, irrespective of scientific truth, is the method of a Stalin," he observed, and withdrew to the other end of the car.

"Really," said Norma, "I don't know how you can be so rude and ungrateful to him. When I think of them all with their toasting forks, and that poor

woman hanging there without a stitch on, and upside-down, too —"

"It was all quite appropriate to the time and place. He's a very dangerous young man," said Mr. Forkett firmly.

Henry thought it time to change the conversation. The four of them chatted more generally as the train rattled on at a good speed, though not as fast as it had descended. But after a time the talk began to wilt. Glancing up the coach, Henry noticed that Mr. Watts had already gone to sleep again, and felt that there was no better way of spending the time.

He awoke to hear voices shouting: "Stand clear of the doors!" and to find that the carriage was full of people again. Almost as his eyes opened, Norma's elbow stuck into his ribs.

"Look!" she said.

The straphanger in front of them was interested in the racing part of his paper, so that the front page faced them with the headline: RUSH-HOUR TUBE SMASH — 12 DEAD. Under it was a column of names. Henry leaned forward to read them. The holder of the paper lowered it to glare indignantly, but not before Henry had noticed his own name and those of the others.

Norma looked troubled.

"Don't know *how* I'm going to explain that at home," she said.

"You get my point?" inquired Mr. Forkett on Henry's other side. "Just think of the trouble there's going to be straightening this out — newspapers, coroners, heaven knows what. Not a safe fellow to have about. Quite antisocial."

"I don't know what my husband is going to think. He's such a jealous man," remarked Mrs. Branton, not without satisfaction.

The train stopped at St. Paul's, thinned somewhat, and then went on. Mr. Forkett and Norma prepared to get out. It occurred to Henry that he might as well get out, too. The train slowed.

"Don't know what they're going to say in the office, seeing me walk in. Still, it's been ever so int'resting, really. Ta-ta for now, everyone," said Norma, and wriggled into the departing crowd with the skill of long practice.

A hand grasped Henry's arm as they stepped on to the platform. "There he is," said Mr. Forkett. He nodded ahead. Henry saw the back view of Mr. Watts preceding them up the platform. "Can you spare a few minutes? Don't trust the fellow at all."

They followed up the escalator and round to the steps which brought them to the surface in front of the Royal Exchange.

There, Mr. Watts paused and

(*Continued on page 162*)

Illustrator: Robert Kay

FOUR MEN

AND A

SUIT CASE

By RALPH ROBIN

Which would you think is more important: nuclear fission or the price of a fifth of whisky? Well, as the man said when he met his 450-pound cousin for the first time: all of that is relative!

Take Frank, for example. He lived — if lived is the right word — on Skid Row. To Frank, the shape of Heaven resembled something turned out by Libby-Owens, provided it was filled with the right stuff. Yet he traded an entire quart bottle of the best in spirits for an egg-shaped whatsis that drank sour milk and formed pictures of squares and circles. Most of his friends thought Frank was off his rocker for wasting good liquor — and eventually he proved they were right!

BILL was standing on River Street wishing he had twenty-five cents for a drink. He had seventeen cents. It would have been easy enough to bum ten cents if he could have got up the nerve to stop someone, but without a drink first he never had the nerve.

Three other men who looked alike and looked like Bill — as four orientals might look alike to a tourist — were in a huddle a few yards away.

One of them turned from the others and walked over to Bill.

"Listen. We're going to split a pint. Want in? How much you got?"

"Twelve cents," Bill said.

The man shook his head and started to walk away.

"Wait. I've got seventeen cents. It's all I got. Let me in for that much.'

"I'll ask them."

Trembling, Bill watched the men: he could not hear them. There was a nodding of heads, and they waved him over.

"This is Frank. That's Smitty. I'm Lester."

"My name's Bill."

"We're going to drink it in Frank's room," said Lester, the man who had approached Bill. "He has a room."

"Yes, sir, I have a room," Frank said.

Lester counted the quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies. He held the money in his cupped hands and they marched him to the nearest liquor store, where he bought a pint of blend.

The four men went to Frank's room, which was big enough for them to sit on the edge of the bed if they didn't stretch their legs. There was nothing to be seen in the room except the bed, a broken rocking chair, and a half-filled bottle of milk on the window sill. The milk looked soured.

Lester opened the whiskey. He measured with his fingers; placed his thumb firmly near the neck of the bottle.

"That about right for Bill? Might as well let him have his first, then share and share alike."

"Let's see," said the host, squinting. Not much light came through the dirty window. "That's about right. Mind you don't go below it, Bill."

"Check," said Smitty.

Bill put his thumb beside Lester's and they raised the bottle to Bill's mouth. He drank and let go the bottle, and it snapped back. Lester drank and handed it to Frank.

Bill felt a little more like a man. He stretched his arms in the air; he kicked forward and backward.

His heel rapped something hard.

"Watch it," Frank said.

"Watch what?"

"Just watch what you're kicking."

"All right. I didn't mean any harm."

"Frank's pretty careful with that suitcase," Lester said.

"He don't want nothing to happen to that suitcase," Smitty said.

"That's enough about that suitcase," Frank said.

Bill's eyes followed the bottle as it went around. He wished he had another seventeen cents.

"It's a mighty important suitcase," Frank said.

"Frank's going to make a lot of money out of that suitcase some day. Soon's he figures out how to handle the deal."

"Shut up, Smitty. You fellows

promised to keep your mouths shut. After all we don't know this guy from a hole in the ground."

"Who's doing all the talking?" Lester said.

"I won't bother your suitcase," Bill said. "I won't bother you fellows at all. I've had the drink I paid for and I'll beat it." His feelings were hurt, and anyway he wanted to get out on the sidewalk and start mooching before the drink wore off.

"Aw, don't be like that," the host said. "Here, have another pull — I'll pay for it, fellows."

But he didn't bring out any money, and Lester and Smitty looked unhappy while Bill took a timid swallow from the bottle.

"I think Bill's okay," Frank said. "Maybe he'll have some ideas how to handle the deal. You promise to keep your mouth shut, Bill, and I'll show you what I got in that suitcase."

Bill wasn't interested, but he was hoping the bottle would come back to him once more before it was empty. "I'll keep my mouth shut," he said.

"Make him swear," Lester said importantly.

"Swear you won't tell anybody," Frank said.

Bill held up his right hand. "I swear I won't tell anybody. So help me God."

Frank nodded. "You'll have to get off the bed," he said.

The three guests crowded at the door, while Frank dragged out the suitcase. It was made of fiber and was very large. It was almost a small trunk.

Frank pulled up the frayed top, lifted something carefully in his arms, and put it on the bed. Smitty shoved the suitcase back under the bed.

At least four feet long, the object on the old army blanket seemed a giant egg. It was shaped like an egg and in the dim light it looked the color of a brown hen's egg. But it didn't have the rigid shell. It lay quivering where Frank had placed it: quivering softly, like an egg hard-boiled and peeled.

"What is it, Frank?" Bill asked. Not that he cared.

"Damned if I know, but wait till you see what it does. It's going to be worth a lot of money to me, when I figure out how to handle the deal."

"Frank gave a fellow a whole unopened quart for it," Smitty said.

"It was worth it," Frank said seriously.

"What's it do?" Bill asked. He casually held out his hand and Frank passed the bottle to him. He drank, never taking attentive eyes from Frank's face. He quickly handed the bottle to Smitty.

"Yell at it," Frank said.

"Boo."

"Naw. Yell at it good like you

were going to hurt it. And get close up."

"Hey, this isn't a trick, is it? It won't do something to me?"

All his life people had played tricks on Bill.

Lester snickered.

"What've you got in your blood?" Frank demanded. "You always been that yellow?"

Shamed, Bill bent his head over the bed and yelled, as he would have liked to yell at Frank: "I'll tear you apart with my bare hands."

But he couldn't help jerking his head back.

Light traced a circle in the center of the egglike thing; the circle filled with light, was a glowing disk. Black dots and lines shot across the disk.

"Is it some kind of television set?"

"That's what I thought," Smitty said.

Indeed, something like a television image was forming.

The image sharpened. It was at first a square, as if neatly drawn, cut cater-corner by a straight line into two triangles. One triangle abruptly vanished. The remaining triangle drifted to the center of the disk. A square appeared on each side of the triangle, so that each side was one side of a square. New lines crisscrossed each square into little squares.

On two sides of the triangle the little squares drifted away, mixed together, and formed a large square. It was the same size as the other large square.

"That reminds me of something in school . . . a long time ago," Bill said. He remembered but did not speak of a tall Miss Bruce in a yellow dress proving on the blackboard that the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other sides.

"It likes that one," Lester said. "It often starts with that one."

"You talk like it's alive."

Lester and Smitty looked at Frank.

"It is alive," Frank said. "I'll show you something."

He picked up the bottle of milk from the window sill. A sour smell filled the room as he pulled the cap out.

"He gets it from the chefs in restaurants," Smitty explained. "Spoiled milk. He tells them he drinks it hisself."

Frank swirled the milk, loosening the chunks of curd. He bent over the bed.

He squeezed the narrower end of the egg. A slit opened in the soft, tan surface. Frank poured in some sour milk and let the slit close. Bill could barely see the place, even knowing where it was.

"It eats!"

"When I feed it," Frank said.

Bill looked at the lighted circle. "The picture's fading."

"It always does when you treat it nice."

"Yell at it, Frank," Smitty said.

"You goddamn rotten egg, I'm going to kick the living hell out of you," Frank shouted.

Now there was a new picture. It was a cross formed of two straight lines that cut the bright disk like a pie into quarters. And there was a different figure in each quarter. A short straight line. A circle. A thing like a letter O. A figure like the nose of a bullet. Bill did not remember and the others had never seen Cartesian curves.

"That won't do you any good," Smitty screamed. "He's going to kick the living hell out of you."

The picture faded. The bright area dimmed; diffused into the mottled tan skin.

"It's something, all right," Bill said. "You ought to get a lot of money for something like that." *I wish they didn't have to treat it that way*, he thought. *I don't like hearing them yell at it. I wish I hadn't yelled at it.*

"I am going to get a lot of money for it. Soon as I figure out how to handle the deal. Got any ideas, Bill?"

Frank had the whiskey bottle again, and it was almost empty. Bill looked at it sort of absent-mindedly. "Here. Finish it," Frank said grandly.

Bill took the bottle quickly, afraid the others would object. He gulped what was left in the bottle, wiped his mouth, and looked thoughtful. "A circus might give a lot of money for it."

"There won't be no circus here for three months," Smitty said.

"Those circus guys aren't honest," Lester said. "I worked for a circus one time and I know. They'd gyp you, Frank."

"Circus is one thing I'm considering," Frank said. "Got any other ideas, Bill?"

"How about some rich man? Some big banker might find a thing like that mighty handy for tickling his friends at his big parties."

"He'll tickle his friends hisself," Smitty said.

Lester roared.

"This is serious," Frank said. "That's a good suggestion, Bill. Have another drink."

"The bottle's empty," Lester said. "Mr. Seventeen Cents polished it off."

"I vote we get another pint and figure out how to handle this deal. I won't forget you fellows, you help me."

"You've been singing that song for a long time, Frankie," Lester said. "I don't think you're ever going to figure out how to handle the deal. I got a proposition. I know where I can lay my hands on some capital. Why don't you sell it to me? I'll give you two full

quarts —" Smitty's eyes were wide "— and that'll make you one hundred per cent profit on your investment and no more worries about how to handle the deal."

"It's not for sale. I've told you that before, goddamn it."

"Okay, okay. No harm in asking."

"How about that pint?" Smitty said.

"Are we all in?" Lester jerked his head toward Bill.

"I guess I'll blow," Bill said. "I don't have any more money."

"No, stick around, Bill," said the host. "You've got some pretty good ideas. Course we can't stake you any more. Say! Those shoes look almost new. Where'd you get them?"

"Fellow left them in an open car." Bill looked around nervously.

"We know a guy loan you fifty cents on shoes like that," Frank said.

"But I need them —"

"What've you got in your blood?"

Frank and Smitty pulled out the coins they had been saving for a meal. Lester was sent with the money and the shoes, for they had drunk enough to trust him. And he was back before anybody got anxious, with another pint.

The bottle went around.

For once the drinks didn't make Bill feel happier. He leaned against the dirty wall and wiggled his toes in and out of his torn socks. He wished he had his strong shoes back. He wished he had a pint all his own. He wished he was by himself.

He looked at the egg-shaped freak shivering gently on the army blanket. *Poor old egg*, he thought. *Poor old egg*. He didn't know whether he meant himself or the freak on the bed. Sadness was prickling in his eyes and nose. He did not want to burst into tears.

"How about it, Bill? How about it, Bill, boy? Any more ideas how to handle the deal?"

"Sell it — sell it — to the people who make movies in Hollywood — the big directors," Bill stammered. Then he blurted: "But you oughtn't to treat it the way you do. You oughtn't to yell at it and hurt its feelings. If that's what you've got to do to make it do things, you ought to just give it to somebody who will give it a good home. Somebody kind."

"Tie that. He's sorry for it," Lester said.

"He thinks we're brutes," Smitty said in falsetto.

Frank said: "It's all business with me. Just a matter of figuring out how to handle the deal. But if I have to kick the living hell out of it to make me some money, don't think you or anyone else is going to stop me."

"I didn't —"

"We thought you were a good

guy and here you are drinking our whiskey —"

"You took my shoes."

"— and telling me how to treat my own property. This is a free country and a land of opportunity and you're not going to tell me what to do."

"That's giving it to him," Smitty said. "That's laying it on the line."

"I'll show him what I can do with my property." Frank put his mouth close to his property and screamed: "I'll cut you in pieces, goddamn you, and flush you down the can."

Its middle glowed again; then darkened; then began to glimmer with stars. Then the moons appeared. There were four moons in different phases, from a thin crescent to a full face.

"It's beautiful," Bill murmured, "but you shouldn't make it do it that way. I think it's something from — far away. I think it's trying to tell us. You should treat it right. And you should take it to —" He searched his mind for someone in authority. "You should take it to the President."

They laughed; they hooted; they thumped each other. They jumped up and down. They slapped Bill's shoulders in mock admiration.

"The President. Take it to the President. Yes, sir, Napoleon, your majesty, we'll hop the next freight going straight to Washington."

They dug their hands in their clothes, imitating Napoleon.

"Or the cops," Bill said desperately. "They'd know where to take it."

There was silence.

"The cops," Smitty said. He spat on the floor.

"Copper-hearted," Frank said. "A cop-crier."

He bent over the bed. "Show us something different," he screamed. He pulled back his hand and slapped the soft form. The marks of his fingers were dark on its side.

Lester looked worried. "Be careful, Frank. You'll ruin it."

"You keep out of this too!"

The stars and the moons vanished. A single gray figure took their place as the background brightened.

"That stinks," Frank said.

"It looks like a toadstool," Smitty said.

Bill said slowly, "I've seen a picture like that."

"That makes it stink worse." Frank slapped his property again, on the other side. "Show us something better."

"Why —" Bill started. It was the last word he said.

The city crumpled, and the screaming began.

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Illustrator: Frede Vidar

OPERATION MIND-PICK

By WILLIAM P. McGIVERN

They formed an odd cross-section of humanity: a cynical Chicago newsman, a fading New York actress, a loud-mouthed Texas cattle baron, a small boy who hated doctors, a pious old Italian woman who owned a Brooklyn fruit store, a lovely young school teacher from Maine. Six of them, confined in a room without windows or doors, held as prisoners by captors they had never seen and for a purpose none could guess.

They were helpless, without hope — until Larry Colby remembered the one weapon even an unarmed man can use: the limitless power of thought. . . .

AUGUST 10TH, 1972

LARRY COLBY, a rewriteman on the Chicago *Express*, came up Michigan Boulevard at four o'clock in the afternoon. The day was hot but pleasant; a breeze off the lake

had cleaned the air of smoke, dust, and humidity. Larry Colby was tall, thin, and pale; erratic hours, the pressure of his work, and too much tobacco and coffee were responsible for his run-down condition. He kept promising himself a fishing vacation in Wisconsin, or some regular gym work but never got around to it. On his nights off he sat in gin mills, listening to jazz, and the sharply flavored conversations of sports writers, bookies, fight managers, and racing addicts. This was a deplorable waste of time, he knew, but he enjoyed it nevertheless. Someday he'd go on a fresh air binge, and maybe write That Novel. Meanwhile, like most people prodigal of health and talent, he was having a fine time . . .

A man stopped him for a light. Larry took out a packet of matches, aware without really thinking about it, that another man had come up behind him. Something sharp dug into his back, and he felt a tiny sting between his shoulderblades. It was as if he'd been stuck with a needle.

The man who'd asked for the matches had a perfectly blank face. Too blank. It was like a mask.

Larry started to turn but all the strength was running from his arms and legs. The men were taking him toward the curb, toward the open doors of a black sedan.

Preposterous, he thought.

A kidnapping in the middle of the afternoon on Michigan Boulevard. Preposterous. He thought of struggling, of yelling for help, but his muscles were out of his control.

Preposterous, he thought once more. Who'd bother kidnapping a working stiff of a newspaperman?

That was his last thought.

AUGUST 10TH, 1972

Valerie Ward entered her dressing room with the sound of applause ringing pleasantly in her ears. She sat down at her dressing table and began to rub cold cream into her beautiful but definitely-not-youthful face. She drew back from the cruelly honest examination of the lights, went on massaging her face with the tips of her fingers. I'm forty-two, she thought, making her lips move silently with the words, deliberately forcing herself to contemplate that fact. And then she shuddered. Forty-two wasn't old.

She said that aloud, sneering at the lie. Oh no, not old. Not old for a cathedral. Not old for a work of art. But she was a woman. She was no Duse; character bits weren't for her, and she didn't have the talent for Shakespeare, or Shaw, or the Greek stuff.

She stared at herself for a moment or two. The hair was wonderful. Black, healthy, forming a classic frame for her angular face. They couldn't photograph her badly. She could look over her

shoulder and pose, and the result was always the same in one respect, but different in subtle other ways. She always looked good, a flawless creature whose bones formed planes of beauty from any angle, but she always looked different, too. They never knew what kind of picture they'd get of her, except that in one way or another it would be compelling and exciting.

And now she was forty-two. Lines were coming in at the sides of her eyes, and her throat, on certain days and in certain lights, looked like crepe paper.

She began to take off her dress. There was nothing wrong with her figure. She had a marvellous constitution. Ate anything, never exercised, and her body stayed like a young girl's. A lucky young girl's. She was five-five without shoes, and weighed one-eighteen. There was a gentle, willowy quality in the lines of her body, but also the exciting conformation of a fully mature woman. Her legs, as she rolled down her stockings, were delicately white, beautifully molded, and the only blemish, a tiny brown beauty mark on her left calf, added rather than detracted from their perfection. The beauty mark was nature's stamp, the tiny, almost whimsical irregularity that all beauty requires for contrast. Anything wholly beautiful is wholly unremarkable. It is the imperfections in a work of art that make us value its perfections.

All of this had been said to Valerie by men — in one way or another. For one reason or another. She had had everything that most human beings could imagine themselves wanting over the past twenty-five years, but her appetites — for love, applause, importance — were as ravenous as ever. Supposing she went on this way? Losing the things which got her what she wanted, but never wanting to give up her rewards? That was an ugly prospect, a frightening one, and she kicked off her pumps angrily, feeling the thin cold line of fear running down her back.

It was then that the door opened and the two men — men with blank faces — entered. They came directly toward her, not speaking, and one of them took her arm.

She wasn't frightened. Nothing bad could happen to her — yet. She was, on this knife-edged moment in time, supreme.

Then the man stuck a needle into her arm, and she tried to scream.

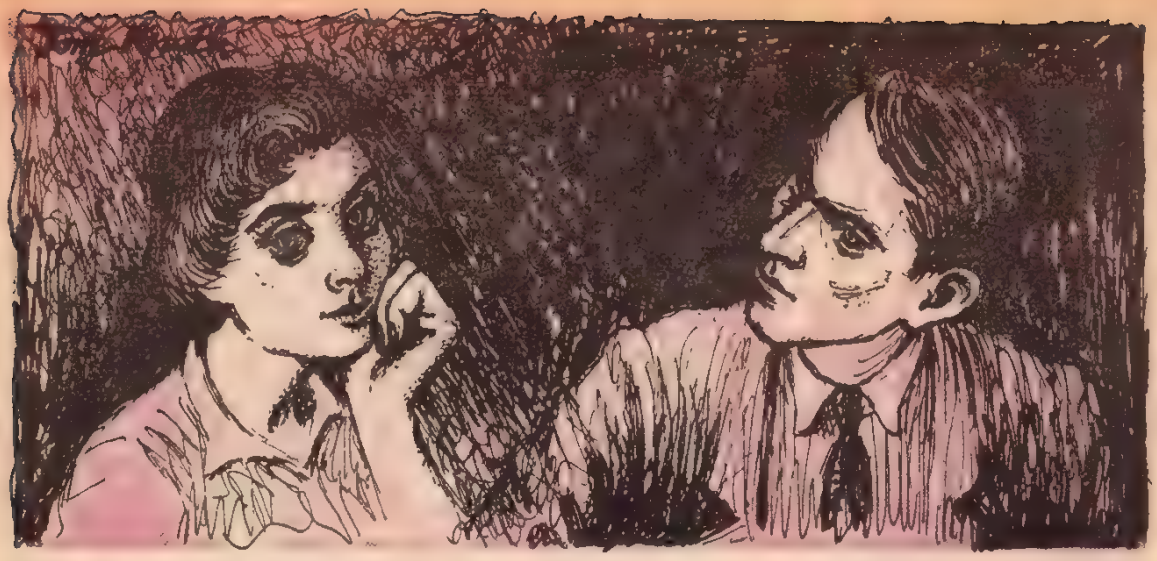
But no sound came from her throat. She couldn't move, couldn't think. They were putting a robe about her, leading her to the door.

Where were they taking her?

Why?

AUGUST 10TH, 1972

Dickie Williams was ten years



old. He was a freckle-faced, red-haired boy, rugged and cheerful, humming to himself as he played before his home on a pleasant, tree-bordered street. He was getting ready to shoot an elm tree, stalking it carefully, his small, grimy hand tense above an imaginary holster and gun. It wasn't a tree really, it was Doctor Edmonds, who'd be coming tomorrow to swab his throat, and that would be the doctor's last visit. Bang! Bang! Bang!

A man tapped his shoulder, and Dickie looked up. The man was funny-looking, with a perfectly blank face. Dickie started to say hello, but he couldn't talk. Something had hurt his arm. It was stinging. The man was leading him to a car.

He felt angry and belligerent. He'd kick this man in the shins, he'd drill him full of holes.

But he did nothing at all.

AUGUST 10TH, 1972

J. Worthington Macklin was a Texas rancher, oil man, and real-estate man. Anything he touched, business-wise, had a way of acquiring the significance of blue chips in a high-stake poker game. But in other things, his family, for instance, it was an entirely different matter.

He was thinking of this, not gloomily, but with self-righteous anger, as he rode across the rich range land that spread for hundreds of thousands of acres about his baronial home. Everything he could see belonged to him; herds of cattle, rich grass, smartly kept out-buildings, they were all his.

His house dogs were either Great Danes or Belgian cart dogs, immense pure-breds as big as Shetland ponies. Macklin liked things big; he had no use for little dogs, little horses, little ranches, or little people. Even his wife, a statuesque woman now in her late forties, followed the pattern. Macklin's sons were All-America football players, out-sized young men with tremendous bodies and appe-

tites, but without much native intelligence. They were good-natured behemoths, rather dull, rather stupid. The only disappointment in his life had been the birth of a daughter eighteen years before; he was ashamed of siring a girl. In his clubs, and at his office, he had treated the thing as an embarrassing joke, one which he didn't want to be reminded of.

He thought of her now, as he rode his great white stallion over the range, wondering how he could make her conform to his own ideas of seemly womanly behavior.

Then he saw something that made him forget all about his daughter. An autogyro which he had seen hovering about in the air, was settling down to land. Previously, he had wished that the autogyro would clear the hell away from his ranch. It was flying over *his* land, and he didn't like it. The autogyro bothered him as a gnat might annoy a giant. But now the pesky thing was actually coming *down* on his land. And it was in no trouble, obviously. It was simply trespassing. Spurring his horse, and enjoying the righteous wrath that was pepping up his endocrines, he galloped toward the now-landed plane.

Two men hopped out of the plane. Little men, he thought contemptuously, and in city clothes. Their faces were the pale blank faces of city dwellers.

"G-get off!" he yelled, stuttering slightly, as was his custom. "G-get off, you hear?"

He reined up beside the men, glaring at them from cold, shiny blue eyes. One of them moved his hand toward the horse, then touched Macklin on the leg. He felt a stinging sensation.

He realized, with a vast sense of outrage, that he was falling from his horse. The men didn't catch him; they let him strike the ground heavily.

The stallion reared and dashed off, neighing in terror.

The men loaded Macklin into the autogyro . . .

AUGUST 10TH, 1972

Patience O'Neill was a grade-school teacher in a rural area of New England. She was a small, quick girl of twenty-five, with clean brown hair which she wore parted in the middle and coiled in braids at the base of her neck. Her complexion was clear and healthy, a result of sensible diet, and regular exercise. She walked the two miles from the village to the school-house each day, only taking the bus on the worst of the winter days. At all other times Patience used the road, a small, conservatively dressed figure, walking with a long free stride and making a point of inhaling deeply to a regular count. She didn't smoke or drink, and she had never been in love. There were no repressions or inhibitions threatening to expose her orderly psyche. She would love a man when she found one to love, and she had tried cigarettes and liquor but hadn't enjoyed them. Her name, Patience, was the touchstone of her character; she was a woman who could wait without anxiety, who could plan without feeling she was deluding herself, and who could do her work with pleasure, savoring today and not asking tomorrow to keep any preposterous promises.

She left her school-house at mid-day, having tutored several young boys and girls who were putting in extra hours to make up work lost in the regular term through illness. The day was sunny and bright, with a high cheerful wind blowing through the green trees. She set out smartly, her small, neatly-shod feet falling as regularly as the hand of a metronome, and breathing the warm clear air down deeply into her lungs.

The car that drew up beside her, and the man who got out and beckoned to her, were hardly enough to interrupt her rhythmic stride. She would have strode on, her back a bit straighter because she didn't like men addressing her this way, but sympathy and sense of responsibility were instinctive to her, and so she stopped, grave and composed, as the man approached and, surprisingly, put a hand on her arm.

She cried out against the needle-prick of pain in her wrist, but no sound passed her lips.

The man was leading her toward the car.

It was peculiar and unreasonable.

Unless . . .

Her last thought was typical of her, practical and tolerant; if he planned to use her lustfully, she was grateful that she would know nothing of it until afterwards . . .

AUGUST 10TH, 1972

Mrs. Maria Consolo had celebrated her seventy-fifth birthday the day before and now, as she

puttered aimlessly about her little fruit and vegetable store in Brooklyn, she was smiling with pleasure at the memories of the party. All those people, her family and friends, and all that food and wine. *Mama Mia!* Her memory was bad; scenes from her native Sardinia were sharper in her old head than the events of yesterday, and she couldn't remember all the people who came in to wish her health and long-life. She was a tiny woman, with a face as withered as a winter apple, and eyes that were as sharp and black as tiny marbles. Her husband had their little business until he had retired with a pain in his back, and so now she ran it, weighing out potatoes, onions, tomatoes, and eggplants to her own kind, people she had known all her life, who liked her manner, and her prices, and who were slightly afraid of the giant super-market in the next block.

Maria looked up smiling as the two men entered her store.

She asked them what they wanted as the man put a hand on her shoulder. This didn't strike her as unusual; lots of her customers patted her old back as she bustled about serving them. She didn't feel the little sting of pain for several seconds; her body was old and its reflexes slow. When she did feel the pain she let out a yelp of profanity in her native tongue.

But the words didn't sound.

She was aware that the men were leading her out of her store and she knew nothing but a blind terror and confusion.

They awoke the following day, these six strangely assorted humans, and despite the differences in their ages, sex, and backgrounds, their reactions were identical. At first, as consciousness flickered dimly, they knew confusion. Then, as the light of intelligence burned brighter, they were gripped with terror.

Each of them, at the moment of awakening, was alone, lying on a narrow cot in a small, windowless room. After the paralyzing moment of pure terror faded, they got to their feet, moving clumsily, fearfully, and faced the closed doors of their rooms . . .

Larry Colby, the newspaperman, was the first to put out a hand, turn the knob, and open the door. He walked forward into a large, circular, windowless chamber. There was no furniture in this larger room; the concrete floor and walls were bare, unadorned.

Larry put a trembling hand to his forehead, trying then to think, trying to fight down a swiftly burgeoning hysteria.

A door opened on his right and he wheeled to the sound, his instincts prodding him with animal-like intensity.

A small boy ran into the room,

sobbing, gazing about wildly. He saw Larry and backed away from him, his babyish mouth twisting in fear.

"Let me alone," he cried, in a high, breaking voice. "I want to go home. I got to go home!"

"Take it easy, kid," Larry said. He swallowed with difficulty. "I'll — I'll see that you get home. Where do you live?"

"Elm street. 2142 Elm Street."

"In Chicago?"

"No, in Butte. That's in Montana. Mister, you got to take me home. You said you would."

"Sure, kid."

Another door opened and a strikingly attractive woman entered the large, circular chamber. She wore a robe over a slip, and her bare feet were thrust into pink satin mules. There was fear and confusion in her face, but, under that, a swiftly growing anger.

Larry recognized those flawless features, the imperiously slender body, with a distinct start. This was Valerie Ward, whose name sounded in the world of the theatre with the same authority as Bankhead's and Cornell's.

She stared at Larry, her hands on her hips. "Okay, where do we go from here?" she said in the wonderful, husky voice which night-club comics had been imitating for a decade.

"I'll be damned if I know," he said.

"It was a kidnapping, wasn't it? Or was it a fraternity stunt? I'd like to know, since I'm the package you kids are playing with so gaily."

Still another door opened. Maria Consolo hobbled into the room, crying and wringing her hands. The boy began to cry when he saw her, and dropped down on the floor and buried his face in his arms.

"What the *hell* is going on?" Valerie Ward yelled. "Who are you people? The cast of a soap opera?"

Maria Consolo sank to her knees and began to pray, her shaky old voice bouncing harshly from the concrete walls and ceiling. Maria, "Mother of God . . ."

Patience O'Neill, the trimly-dressed Maine schoolteacher, joined the group at that point. She was badly shaken and scared, but her hard, native common sense hadn't deserted her; she looked from one face to another and then wet her lips.

"My name is Patience O'Neill," she said. "I would be obliged if you could tell me why I was brought here?"

There was no answer.

"Well?" Patience said, a trifle irritably. "Do you know, or don't you?"

"We don't," Larry said.

This blunt answer jarred Patience. She took a small step backward, as if the words had struck

her with tangible, physical force, and then squared her straight, firm shoulders. "Who are you?" she said. "Can you tell me that?"

"That's a sensible approach," Larry said. He liked this girl. She was direct and intelligent. The way she stood and looked — her small feet close together, her body straight, her brown eyes puzzled but unafraid — it added up to a picture of comforting sanity. There was scant room for hysteria and foolishness in this orderly little person.

"I'm Larry Colby, a newspaperman," he said. "I work for a paper in Chicago. The kid here told me he lives in Butte, Montana. Miss Valerie Ward, whom you may recognize, is an actress. She lives all over the world. I don't know the old woman."

"Aren't we an exciting group," Valerie Ward said bitterly. "All right, I've had enough of these fascinating autobiographies. I've got a show to do tonight. What the hell time is it, anyway?"

Larry glanced at his watch, but it wasn't on his wrist.

Patience repeated the gesture, but her watch was gone, too.

"There's a trick involving a stick and a strong sun," Larry said. "You draw a circle in the ground. It's very clever. Sometimes it works, too."

"Oh, a wit," Valerie said, rubbing her forehead.

Patience crossed the room and knelt down beside the little boy. She took him in her arms and he snuggled close to her, still wailing hideously.

Worthington Macklin made his appearance then, and the group was complete. Macklin's appearance had altered radically during the past twenty-four hours. He seemed to have shrunk in size; his clothes hung loosely on his frame, and his bold, arrogant features were changed by fear. He stared at the other five persons, squaring his shoulders, trying to buck himself up, to regain his confidence. But the memory of the two men who had landed in the autogyro was too vivid, too recent; he couldn't bluster that recollection from his mind. And so, almost humbly, he asked the group what they wanted of him, what he might do to please them. When he learned that they shared his confusion, he began to feel slightly better. Also he had recognized Valerie Ward; and this pleased him mightily. He was a great snob and the thought of being involved in *anything* with this illustrious legend was very stimulating. The rest of the group he dismissed with his customary arrogance: Colby, a poorly-paid newspaperman, Patience O'Neill, a poorly-paid schoolteacher, the boy and the old woman, completely insignificant.

"W — well, what are we going to do?" he said, addressing the

question to Valerie Ward. "I've got three board meetings lined up for today, plus the job of reorganizing a railroad."

"There's nothing we can do," Larry Colby said. He glanced at the walls. "It's solid concrete. No openings that I can see. We're stuck here until they let us out."

"Who are 'they'? Valerie Ward said, pacing restlessly.

Larry shrugged.

Macklin worried his lip.

Maria Consolo got up from her knees, blessing herself quickly, and looked around with quick, darting eyes. "I have said my prayers, and now I must go home. My husband needs me, and my little store is without me."

She tottered away from them to the wall. She pressed her old hands against the concrete. "I cannot see the door," she said.

"There isn't any door," Larry said.

"Oh, yes, there is," Maria said in a reasonable voice. "It is here and I must find it." She moved to her left, touching the wall with the tips of her fingers.

"She's off her rocker," Valerie Ward said.

"How long will the rest of us last?" Larry said.

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "The atmosphere isn't ideally conducive to peace of mind."

"You're a quitter, eh?" Macklin shouted. He began striding up and down, pounding a fist into his palm. "By Gad, where's your courage, your old-fashioned guts?" From the corner of his eye he watched the effect of this on the actress, Valerie Ward. She'd see what a red-blooded man, a Texan, was made of, he thought. And Valerie *was* impressed. In this atmosphere of pointless mystery, of defeatism, of insanity, it was *something* to hear a confident, affirmative voice.

"Well, bully for you," she said. "I'm glad you aren't giving up. What're you going to do?"

Macklin stopped pacing, and looked blank.

Larry grinned slightly. "The next move is up to them," he said.

"Yes, I guess you're right," Macklin said in a worried voice . . .

Several hours passed. Larry squatted on the floor beside Patience O'Neill, and they took turns at trying to amuse the little boy, Dickie Williams. He was already in a sunnier mood; Patience was telling him quaint, imaginative stories, and Larry was regaling him with bloodthirsty epics of the newspaper world.

Macklin was chatting with Valerie, telling her of his baronial holdings, of the mighty *coups* he had engineered in the business world, of his brilliant climb to

fame and fortune and acclaim.

She was impressed — but not as Macklin would have wished. Valerie was impressed with the fact that any man could take himself so seriously, could be, in short, such a crashing bore. They sat side-by-side with their backs against the wall. Valerie's slim legs were crossed at the ankles, and she was nodding and yawning as Macklin's voice boomed into her ear. Old Maria Consolo continued her patient search for the door, circling the room slowly, stepping over Valerie's legs, tapping the wall hopefully with gnarled old fingers.

Abruptly, a metallic noise sounded.

Everyone got quickly to his feet.

"Look!" Dickie Williams shouted.

A section of the wall was turning slowly. This section was a cylinder-like affair that ran from floor to ceiling. It was about two feet wide. As it revolved they suddenly noticed something else; the odor of food. When the column completed half a revolution it stopped. Trays of food and drink were stacked neatly in niches in the back of the pillar.

"They're going to feed us at least," Larry said.

There were six trays, and on each a plate containing two broiled pork chops, French-fried potatoes, lima beans, and sliced tomatoes. On smaller plates was a dessert of chocolate pudding and cookies. There were five cups of coffee, and one glass of milk.

Patience persuaded Maria to eat something, and everyone settled to the floor with a tray. The food was hot, excellently prepared, and they ate hungrily.

"D — damn good, isn't it?" Macklin said, gnawing at the bone of his pork chop. He laughed. "Pity they didn't send in some cigars."

"Return the trays when you have finished," a voice said.

Macklin looked at Colby. "What's that?"

Larry was frowning. "I didn't say anything. Listen a second."

They all waited, staring at the walls, the ceilings, the revolving column which had given them food.

Again, the voice sounded. It came from above them, but none of them could determine the exact place it originated. They stared upward, their eyes roving the ceiling.

The voice said: "Return the trays when you have finished. You are not going to be harmed. You will be returned to your homes in two-hundred-and-sixteen hours. You are in no —"

"Who are you? Let us out of here, damn it," Macklin shouted, jumping to his feet.

"— danger," the voice con-

tinued inexorably, talking through Macklin's outburst.

"You're going to pay for this," Macklin yelled, shaking a fist at the ceiling.

The voice was silent.

They waited expectantly, but the room remained silent.

A few moments passed, and then Patience O'Neill stood and carried her tray to the column and placed it in a niche. She did the same with the boy's and Maria's. Larry returned his own and Macklin, muttering irritably, took care of his and Valerie's. The column turned slowly; the empty trays disappeared. Once again the surface of the wall was smooth and unbroken.

"Well, what are we going to do?" Macklin demanded.

"There isn't anything we can do, I'm afraid," Patience said. "They say we are not to be harmed. In two-hundred-and-sixteen hours, which is nine full days, we are to be returned to our homes."

"You trust them, eh?" Macklin said.

"Well," Patience said, in her practical fashion, "it doesn't matter a great deal whether I do or don't. I can't do anything about it, one way or the other."

"You make sense," Valerie Ward said. "We can't do a damn thing. We're helpless."

"No, we're not," Larry Colby said unexpectedly.

"What do you mean?"

"We can think. That's something."

Macklin laughed unpleasantly. "Think your way through a stone wall, eh?"

"It's been done before," Larry said. He stretched out his long legs and rested his head against the wall. They were watching him, except for old Maria, with skeptical expressions. "The human mind has some pretty handsome achievements to its credit. They didn't split the atom with an axe, remember. Einstein just sat down and thought about it."

Patience was looking thoughtful now, and Valerie seemed interested. Little Dickie was plainly sleepy and bored; he didn't see why this newspaperman should be talking this way when he had all those exciting stories in his head. Macklin resented Valerie's respect for Larry. If there was a way out of this mess, he, Worthington Macklin, would see it, and not this under-paid scribbler.

"Okay, okay," he said. "Start thinking about it. Let's see what happens."

"I've already thought about it," Larry said, grinning widely.

"Oh, yes? Well, what's your solution?"

"So far I've drawn a blank," Larry said. "But I'm going to keep at it. You're all welcome to join in the effort, of course."

There followed a few seconds of uneasy silence. Finally, Valerie shrugged and said, "What are we supposed to think about?"

"Try this, for a start," Larry said. "Think about that voice. What part of the country, or the earth, produced that peculiar voice?"

Macklin snorted. "It wasn't Texas, by God."

"Or Maine," Patience said, after a few seconds silence.

"I can't place it," Valerie said.

"That seems to me worth thinking about," Larry said.

They sat in silence, frowning now and thinking. Or trying to think . . .

As nearly as they could judge time, three days passed uneventfully. They had been fed nine times, they had felt the need for sleep on three separate occasions, and so they guessed that seventy-two hours, roughly figuring it, had passed since they first found themselves in this prison.

The voice had not spoken again.

They were getting edgy and restless, particularly Valerie and Macklin. She was bored to distraction, and her fears were returning. Macklin's constant self-praise was getting on her nerves. He, on the other hand, was convinced he'd made a conquest. One night he had awakened and tip-toed into her sleeping room. He had made a much faster exit, his ears scalded by Valerie's comments on his presumption, his crudeness, his staggering ego.

However, they made it up, after a fashion, the next morning. Macklin protested that it had been an accident, that he was walking in his sleep, and Valerie, who was essentially good-hearted, pretended that she believed him.

On the morning of the fourth day, after breakfast, Larry Colby called them together and studied them with a faint little smile.

"I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes," he said. "I've got an idea I want to test."

"The result of all this thinking?" Macklin asked with ponderous sarcasm.

"Yes, that's it," Larry said pleasantly.

Something in his manner held their attention. They were receptive to hope; they were empty vessels eager to be filled.

"Let's sit down and get comfortable," Larry suggested.

They formed a rough circle on the floor.

"Okay, I'll fire away," Larry said. "Someone, plural or singular, has kidnapped us and is holding us prisoner. Now, they've got a reason for that, or they don't have one. That's the big simple fact. They're sane, or insane. Do any of you disagree?"

"I don't understand," Patience said.

"Well, look at it this way. This kidnapping took plans, money, organization. If there's no reason behind it, then whoever engineered it is nuts — as we use the term. The alternative is that we were abducted for sound, sane reasons. Now — if our captors are insane, we can't hope to guess at their motives. They don't have motives of the sort we might apprehend. Therefore, our only sensible procedure is to assume that our captors are sane, and try, by *thinking*, to determine their motives."

"Hell, that's impossible," Macklin said irritably.

Larry glanced at him. "We won't know until we try. Now, I have a plan which is based on this hypothesis: we six persons were brought together because we have something in common. What that may be, I haven't the faintest idea. However, if we use our brains, we might be able to find out. I'm convinced that we've got to work on this assumption: that we all share some attribute, some peculiarity, *something*, and because of it we've been brought here."

"I think you're dealing in fantasy," Valerie said shortly. "What could we possibly have in common? Look at us: could you imagine a more haphazard, unrelated group of people?"

"That appears to be the case," Larry said. "But let's not buy appearances. Here's what I'm going to do to you hapless people." He paused, smiling; but his eyes were grave. "I'm going to tell you the story of my life. I'll try to make it brief, but, God knows, I can't do much to make it interesting. The point is, you may spot some similarity to your own experiences. We may have all met before, we may all have seen the same thing, heard the same thing, been exposed to the same thing — and that common experience is what we've got to unearth."

"Preposterous," Macklin muttered.

"No, it's not," Patience said quickly. "I see what Larry means."

Dickie was bored. None of this interested him. "Tell me a story," he said wistfully to Larry.

"That's what I intend to do," Larry said. "Here it goes, folks, the story of my life." . . .

He began, where conventional biography decrees, with his birth. That event occurred in Elgin, Illinois, and was comparatively unsung.

"I played Elgin once," Valerie said.

"Okay, there's our first connection," Larry said. "Do you see what I mean now?"

Macklin snapped his fingers, and said, "Tommyrot! What is proven by the fact that you were born in a town in which Miss Ward happened to appear a good

many years ago as an actress?"

"Nothing at all," Larry said. "But this is just the start. Maybe we can find more of the intersecting coincidences. Now let me go on." . . .

Larry told them of his early schooling, and all he could remember of what he had been thinking and dreaming at that time. His years at the State University were fairly typical; he had tried for the football team but hadn't made it, he had landed a job on the school paper, and, in his last year had edited the Annual. There had been experiments with sex, alcohol, and ideas, and his reactions had been those of a healthy body and alert mind.

"I got a job on the local paper, and two years later moved up to the Chicago *Express* as a police reporter," he said.

That was in 1960, the year before the final phase of what they called The Last War. Larry had been in the army since his third year of college. He had been in uniform while working on newspapers; there hadn't been any such animal as an able-bodied civilian since the war started in 1955. Everybody was in it; working days were cut to four hours, and the military took the rest of a man's time.

"I went into active service then in 1961," Larry said, glancing about at the circle of faces. "I served in London, and lived at the Cumberland Hotel." He went on, giving them all the details he could remember, watching eagerly for some change in their expressions, some glow of recognition; but there was none.

"Well," he said, at last, "that brings me up to the end of the war. Anything strike a bell?"

They were silent.

"My life was much different," Patience said, after a short pause. "I — I don't see how there could be any connection, Larry."

"Of course not," Macklin said belligerently. "I told you this was all a lot of nonsense."

"Oh, stop shouting," Valerie said. "I'm slightly less than enthusiastic, myself, but I'm willing to string along. Larry, I stopped at the Cumberland in London, too. That same year."

Larry felt the shock of excitement. Was he going to get his hands on one of the tangled, mysterious skeins that bound this haphazard group together?

"But what does that mean?" Valerie said.

"Okay, let's don't press that one yet," Larry said sharply. "Let me keep going. Let's see, now. Soon after the war." . . .

He'd gone back to the paper. The next year the world had received the news it had been expecting for a decade. Contact with beings from space. They had announced themselves by means of

radio. That was in 1963. In space ships they had approached within a hundred thousand miles of Earth, had rendezvoued there and, for three weeks, had held conversations with scientists of America, Great Britain, France, and even China and Russia. America was well-equipped to repel a hostile invader; The Last War had accelerated the production of guided Hydrogen bombs that could destroy anything that came within ten thousand miles of their launching sites. These terrible weapons were manned and ready, but they hadn't been needed. The Martians were friendly, incurious beings; they hadn't wanted to descend to Earth. After three weeks of exchanging information, they had returned to Mars, and the radio connection had been broken by the great distance they thus put between themselves and Earth.

"That was a great disappointment to me," Larry said. "We needed all the knowledge in the Universe to help us re-build our own countries. I thought there was a chance for permanent peace if we had been able to get closer to the Martians. But, in my frank opinion, our government loused up that chance by a kind of atavistic isolationism — here we sat, guns trained on their ships, and acted surprised when they said no thanks, to any suggestion that they land."

"By God, I knew you were one of them Inter-planetary radicals," Macklin said hotly. "Good riddance to the Martians, and any other of them alien planets, I say. Let 'em go back where they came from. We don't need them here running down our civilization."

There was a short pause. Then Larry said, tiredly: "Okay, that's beside the point, I guess. I thought one thing, you thought another. Let's get back to my autobiography."

He continued doggedly, his hope running short. There had been the work at the paper, the unexpected Pulitzer prize for an exposé of a group which tried to control and profit from the exploitation of the drug which had finally licked cancer. There had been help on that one, from a casual friend who had got hold of the story and passed it on to him gratis. He had tried to share the honor with the man, but by the time the story broke his friend, who'd been a salesman of medical supplies, had moved on to another district and Larry hadn't been able to contact him. The Pulitzer prize had been the high-water mark of his career; after that he'd drunk a bit more than necessary, and that, plus the demands of his job, had begun to put a slow drain on his vitality.

"And that's about it," Larry concluded. He felt tired and

discouraged now, and vaguely apologetic. "Not very exciting, I know. But maybe there's something there that will help us. Any comments?"

"I think you just wanted an excuse to brag about your Pulitzer prize," Macklin said.

"That's a stupid thing to say," Patience O'Neill said sharply. "He's trying to help us all, can't you see?"

"Thanks," Larry said. "Supposing you take a crack at it, Patience?"

"All right," she said, coloring slightly. She cleared her throat and then began her story in a precise, careful voice. Larry listened intently as she sketched in her childhood and early schooling, listening for some point of reference with his own experience, hoping to find that something in common that *must* be, that *had* to be, the reason for their present involvement. Her life had been orderly, systematic, uneventful; in the Last War she had done what everyone else had done, namely, pitched in as air-raid observer, nurse, factory worker, while, at the same time, continuing her work as a teacher. There were a few ups and down, a lucky break occasionally, and many disappointments. Listening to her, and watching her small, earnest face, Larry found himself grateful that there were no serious relationships with men in her life. This is a hell of a note, he thought. Even now, in the middle of this damnable situation, the gonads still run the show.

When Patience finished, she looked around, smiling with some embarrassment. "It's very dull, isn't it?"

"Sister, I'm glad I'm following you," Valerie said. "Even if I'd spent the last forty years in a convent it would sound like a Freudian version of the Arabian Nights."

"I know," Patience said, with a helpless little smile.

"Oh, I livened it up," Valerie said, but something in Patience's humility brought a thoughtful, vulnerable frown to her pale high forehead. She patted Valerie's shoulder unexpectedly. "Don't let me up-stage you, kid. You had a happy time of it, which is something I kind of overlooked." She glanced around at the circle of faces, grinning again, a saucy, reckless grin, every atom in her body reacting now to the audience, to her chosen ability to attract, to startle, to fascinate. "Fasten your seat belts, kiddies, it's going to be a bumpy night," she said.

Valerie's account began innocently enough. She was born, it seemed, without scandal. And she got all the way to five without doing anything to alarm the nation's vice squads. But from then on a purple thread came into her

life, and it broadened with each passing year. Macklin began to cough and study the backs of his hands, and Patience blushed furiously and tried, with a total lack of success, to coax an expression of maidenly disapproval onto her face. Even Larry, whose background had been far from conventional, felt a bit like a gaping peasant listening to tales of royal dalliance.

The background was international, the names legendary, the incidents unprintable. However, Larry noticed, in spite of the deliberate shattering of all rules and codes, Valerie herself, seemed to retain a curious innocence. She was unmoral rather than immoral. There was a largeness of spirit, a good-humored, unthinking kindness, which invested her adventures with the airy unreality of fairy tales. There was nothing mean about her; she could take love from strangers, if they needed to give it, and she could take help from anyone, even a stranger, as she'd done on notable occasions.

But despite his interest, he realized that they were getting nowhere. What did he have in common with this creature? And, vastly more preposterous, what could old Maria, or little Dickie, have in common with her?

When Valerie finished her narrative there was a depressing silence.

"Well?" she asked. "Weren't any of you people in that pool of champagne that the Maharajah had filled for me?"

"I'm afraid not," Patience said, smiling. Then: "But didn't it —" She stopped, coloring.

"Go on!"

"Well — didn't it just about tickle you to death? I had champagne once, and —"

Valerie laughed raucously. "Dearie, it was madness, just madness."

Macklin reddened like a boiling lobster. "I've had enough of this — nonsense."

"Oh, come off it," Valerie said casually. "It's a question of degree. You pinch a maid's fanny, I go swimming in a pool of champagne with a platoon of princes. What's the real difference?"

"I have never pinched —"

"Yeah, what were you doing in my room the other night, you old goat?"

"That was a - - - a miscalculation."

"You bet it was."

"Now, calm down, calm down," Larry said. "This isn't getting us anywhere."

"Well, you can continue without me," Macklin said angrily. "I've had enough of this disgusting — ah — self-slander."

He stood and marched into his room, carrying his dignity and disapproval like splendid plumes.

"Well, that does it," Valerie

said. "We get nowhere if he won't play."

They were all tired. Dickie had gone to sleep in old Maria's arms. Larry sighed and said, "Let's knock off for the time being. We'll take a shot at it tomorrow."

When Valerie left, Patience looked at Larry and said, "Did you learn anything at all, Larry?"

He shook his head . . .

They began again on the evening of the fourth day. Valerie, at Larry's suggestion, had apologized to Macklin, and he rejoined the group; but everything in his manner indicated that he still thought the exercise a waste of time and, worse than that, distinctly degrading.

Dickie regarded it as something of a game. He'd show these grown-ups a lively time, his manner indicated, and they were forced to pull him gently back to reality on several occasions. They discounted his frequent battles with Indians, gangsters and Martians, and tried to infer the essence of his life from his blend of memories and imaginings. It had been a pretty normal existence; his father had been an accountant who'd come into a little money several years back — they couldn't pin down the date. All Dickie remembered was that his Uncle Frank had helped his father out, and they'd moved into a better home and had lots of presents for Christmas. He knew nothing of The Last War, of course; his only strong emotion was connected with his doctor. He hadn't liked the man, obviously, and played games in which he blew his head off with a hydrogen bomb.

"There's nothing there for me," Valerie said, when Dickie finished. "I moved in a less blood-thirsty group, thank Heavens."

They turned then to old Maria. In spite of Valerie's comment, they were in a grimmer mood. Larry's concern had gripped them all, with the exception of Macklin. They knew they were in a ghastly, unknowable kind of trouble; and as time passed they were increasingly ready to clutch at straws.

Old Maria had difficulty understanding what they wanted of her; she had very nearly forgotten her little fruit shop in Brooklyn now, and she had accepted these people as friends. She felt she'd known them all her life, particularly Dickie, who filled a forgotten void in her old heart, a void created by the death of her first-born son. However, she listened intently as Larry talked to her, and finally she began to tell them of Sardinia, which, she realized at last, they were curious about.

Her account of her early life was accurate and sharp. The streets of her village, the friends of her childhood, the annual trip

to the Cathedral of Naples to watch the amazing recoagulation of the blood of Saint Januarius — all of these memories were etched unforgettably in her mind. But the scenes blurred and ran together as she tried to recall more recent events. There was the fruit shop, the loss of sight in her left eye, the priest who came and miraculously spoke Italian to her — this much came back to her sharply; but these events were temporally suspended in a hazy vacuum. The codifying framework of time was gone.

"How are we going to get anything from this?" Patience asked helplessly.

"We've just got keep trying," Larry said.

But old Maria could tell them little more. She even got confused about the fruit shop. For a while it turned bewilderingly into a laundry, where she'd worked like a slave. Then it was the fruit shop again, which she had loved. Her husband had worked in the shop because the labor was light; when she'd been at the laundry he hadn't worked at all, but had lain at home, staring bitterly at the noisy street and threatening God with his vengeance. They queried her on these inconsistencies without result. The stories became increasingly intertwined until poor Maria broke down and began to sob. She sensed the disapproval in their voices, and it cut her.

"Stop bothering her!" Dickie shouted suddenly.

Maria took him in her arms and patted his shoulder, murmuring broken endearments into his ear, while Dickie gazed with tremulous anger at her tormentors.

"We didn't mean to upset her," Larry said gently. "Never mind, it's all over."

Then it was Macklin's turn to talk.

He stared at them all in order, his big, bold, arrogant face flushed with importance. "Now, get this," he said. "All along, I've said this was stupid. I've been proven right, too. We haven't learned one damn thing. But I'll go ahead anyway. I'll be a sport about it."

"Hear, hear," Valerie muttered.

"And when I'm through," Macklin said, flushing, "this time-wasting farce will be over. You all think I'm cocky, I know. But I made a life-long habit of being right, and I'm not changing it now. Okay, are you set?"

Worthington Macklin's life-story, told with ponderous relish, was an account of uninterrupted success and vindication. He had triumphed inevitably, and his enemies had been ignominiously routed. The doctor who had slapped his buttock to shock a gasp of air into his collapsed lungs was fortunate that Worthington Macklin hadn't turned and

slugged him in the jaw. You could at least infer that, Larry thought wearily.

Macklin's school days had been years of glory. He had been a good student, a great athlete, supremely popular with professors, coaches, and students of both sexes. His affairs of the heart, which he recounted with challenging glances at Valerie, all ended in the same fashion: the girl, sobbing gratefully, and swearing that there was never another man like him, and he, gentlemanly, courteous, and suave, sending her on to a future which, without him, would be forever bleak and forlorn.

Valerie made a rude noise at one point, and Macklin threatened to quit unless he was treated with more respect. Larry restored order, and Macklin continued.

In business, he had found new paths of triumph. Money poured in on him in a golden stream. He hadn't been greedy, oh no. But large affairs gravitated to large men, and he had done his duty by administering them to the advantage of lesser mortals who didn't have the brains to come in out of the rain, fiscally speaking.

Then there was marriage, a splendid thing for the woman, of course, and strong, beautiful sons. He glossed over the daughter, which he still regarded as a kind of practical joke on his wife's part, and went on to his still greater triumphs in the business world. He concluded his report with an itemized account of his cattle, horses, acreage, homes, stocks, bonds, savings accounts, suits of clothes, shoes, and neckties.

Then he sat back, hugely pleased, perspiring slightly, and said, "So there! There it is, the full, honest record. Make what you will of it."

There was nothing to make of it, Larry thought gloomily. It didn't touch any of their lives, and probably wouldn't touch the life of *any* human people. Some Greek God maybe, but no poor human. Of course, it was all a fairy tale. Intentionally or otherwise, Macklin had strung together a tissue of dreams. Unless he was more ignorant, or more neurotic than he seemed, Macklin must know he lied. No man went through life without reverses, without disappointments, without meeting deadly assaults against his convictions and self-importance.

"And that's the story, eh?" he said.

"Of course," Macklin said. "Now, don't you see what a waste of time this has been? We've tested your silly theory, and we wind up where I told you we'd wind up: knowing nothing."

Larry was silent a moment, frowning, and then he looked Macklin in the eye. "Don't be too

sure about that," he said. "I've got some ideas."

"What are they?"

"I want to think them out a bit more.

Macklin laughed. "Go right ahead, but count me out."

"Oh, I've already done that," Larry said rising. "Unless you want to be honest."

"Are you calling me a liar?"

Larry hesitated. Then he shrugged: "No. I'm sorry I said that. Forget it, will you?"

Macklin growled pleasurably. "You keep backing in and out of things, don't you? First you know nothing, then you say you've got some ideas. Then you tell me I'm not honest, but you haven't the guts to call me a liar. Just what the hell's bothering you?"

"It's this," Larry said. "I haven't the guts to tell you what I'm thinking."

He walked into his room then and the others stared after him, caught and held in the uneasy silence that settled over the chamber . . .

The next day, the fifth day, Larry spent several hours talking with old Maria. He didn't ask her questions, since that obviously confused her, but let her ramble on as she wished about events in the past. Then he talked to Dickie for most of the afternoon. The others watched these sessions with varying reactions; Patience seemed a little hurt that he was ignoring them, while Valerie was solemn and thoughtful. Macklin, however, continued by his manner to indicate that the whole business was a tiresome bid for attention on Larry's part.

When he finished talking with Dickie, Larry stretched out on his cot, his hands behind his head, and stared at the ceiling . . .

On the seventh day, after breakfast, he took a position in the middle of the large, central chamber, and asked for attention.

"More talk, eh?" Macklin said.

"I want to tell you the results of my pondering," Larry said, smiling faintly. "You know, at the start, I told you we were trying to find out what we had in common. There must be some link between us, I thought, that was responsible for what's happened to us. Now, I've found some of those links. The first one was so obvious that I overlooked it completely."

"Well, what is it?" Valerie said impatiently.

"There's something wrong with all of us," Larry said quietly.

A little silence fell on them. Then Macklin laughed unpleasantly. "There's something wrong with you all right. Something wrong with your head."

Larry looked at him evenly. "How long have you stuttered, Macklin?" he asked.

"W — what?"

"You heard me. You stutter. Maria's lost the sight in her left eye. Dickie has a constant cough. I've been in lousy health for years, and the doctors just say I'm run down. They don't know what's wrong."

"But there's nothing wrong with me," Valerie said. "I've got the constitution of a horse."

"How about the blemish on the back of your left calf?"

"Well, how about it?" Valerie turned and stared down at her bare, shapely leg. "It's just a birthmark."

"Have you always had it?"

"Well — no."

"When did it appear?"

"A few years ago, I think. It was so tiny at first —" Valerie paused, frowning slightly.

"It's growing, isn't it?" Larry said.

"Yes. I never thought about it — I guess I was trying not to."

"Have you been to a doctor about it?"

"Yes. He didn't know quite what it was, but he said it was nothing to worry about."

"I see." Larry glanced at Patience. "You're the only one I'm not sure about. You look fine. Is there anything wrong with you?"

"Not that I know of," Patience said.

"Okay, let's skip that for the moment," Larry said. "We'll go to point number two. The voice we heard the first day we were here. None of you has placed it yet?"

They were all silent.

"The men who abducted us," Larry said. "That's point number three. "We all described the same men. Tall, blank faces, no conversation. Right?"

"Well, yes," Valerie said slowly.

"Okay, point four. There's another link between us, another thing in common. About five years ago all of us made a new friend. All except Macklin that is. Each one of these new friends helped us out in some manner. I'll run down the list: I met a man who gave me the background for a Pulitzer prize story. Dickie here met an 'Uncle Frank' who helped his family financially. Maria, in talking to me the day before yesterday, cleared up that business about the laundry and fruit store. She *did* work at the laundry until a stranger came along and bought her the fruit store. Valerie, you were broke, down on your luck, you said, six or seven years ago, and a man you'd never seen before put up the money for your new play. Isn't that right?"

"Why, yes," Valerie said. "It gave my career a beautiful shot in the arm."

"And I had help, too," Patience said slowly, looking at all of them with troubled eyes. "It was after my father died, as I

told you. He invested what little money was left, and it paid off immediately. I never saw him before that — or after."

"You're touching on point six," Larry said. "All of these benefactors disappeared from our lives, didn't they?"

Macklin shook his head vigorously. "You're forgetting that I didn't have any benefactor," he said.

Larry ignored him, and turned to Patience. "You're sure that your health is good?"

"As far as I know, yes."

"That shoots your theory," Macklin said.

"The hell it does," Larry snapped. "There's something wrong with five of us. And what's wrong with us manifested itself after our contact with these helpful strangers."

"I've stuttered all my l— life," Macklin said. "And I've never met any of these benevolent strangers, anyway. So I don't fit your theory, and neither does Patience."

"Just a minute," Patience said, in a hurried voice. "I had to see a doctor several years ago. It was something about a heart murmur, Larry. He said it wasn't serious, but he was rather surprised, I remember. I'd always been in excellent health."

"Thanks, baby," Larry said softly. He studied Macklin now, a hard angry line about his mouth. "It fits everybody but you. Everyone's sick, everyone met a stranger who for no reason at all helped him out of a jam. You stutter, Macklin, and it's a recent development, isn't it?"

"I've always stuttered," Macklin shouted furiously.

"The hell you have," Larry said. "And how about your stranger? When did you meet him?"

"You're out of your head," Macklin said. "You're so damn eager to prove something that you want us all to invent stories to support your idea. And, what by the way, is your idea? Supposing you're right. We're all sick, we all met strangers who helped us out — okay, assume that. What the hell does *that* prove, anyway?"

"It won't prove anything," Larry admitted wearily. "But it leads to a guess, a hypothesis, if you will, which might explain what's happened. I've been looking for a conclusion which fits all the facts, and I've got one."

"Well, what is it?"

"I'll tell you when you decide to be honest with us," Larry said, and walked back into his room.

Valerie looked at Macklin. "I hope you're not just being stubborn," she said . . .

On the last day — the day of release according to the anonymous voice — Larry called every-

one together again. His face was pale, and there were deep lines of fatigue in his face. He stared bitterly at Macklin. "I'm going to tell you what I've been thinking," he said.

"You aren't going to force me to lie," Macklin said; but he too had changed in the last few days. There was a haunted, worried tone under the ring of his voice.

"Okay, here it is," Larry said quietly. He took a long, deep breath, and glanced from face to face. "I think we've been kidnapped by Martians."

Valerie began to laugh, but the sound of it was tinny and foolish in the silence. She stopped, coloring slightly, and frowned at the group. "Well, did you believe that?" she asked, of no one in particular.

"Of course not," Macklin said quickly; too quickly.

"All right, you're entitled to say it's ridiculous," Larry said. "But first, listen: The men who abducted us, the voice we heard, were not peculiar to any humans we've known. The men had faces like ciphers, the voice was like something coming from a machine. That's where I started: with the idea that perhaps these people weren't from Earth. Okay, we know Mars is inhabited. So maybe they were from Mars. Next question was why? Why would they go to all this trouble? Ten years ago the Martians approached our planet in a spaceship. They were friendly, but disinterested. They didn't land. So why would they come back now to conduct this outlandish experiment?"

"Well, there's no answer to that," Patience said, after a pause. "Our government did invite them to land, after all."

"Our government *said* it invited them to land," Larry corrected her quickly. "Remember that. We really never knew *what* they said. Only what our government told us."

"You think they'd lie to us?" Macklin said.

"I'm not thinking of anything now but what we *know*. And the facts were these: our planet trained guns on the Martians' ships, and *some* kind of exchange took place. Now look at the situation. We badly needed all the help we might have got from a civilization sufficiently advanced to have conquered the problems of space travel. We were trying to get off the floor after The Last War, and were in sad shape. But the Martians never landed. Why? We were told they they just didn't care to — after they'd come millions of miles across space to our planet. Isn't that illogical? We needed them, they wanted to come here — but back they went. Why?"

There was no answer; only an

uneasy shifting of many feet.

"Okay, here's my guess. Our scientists knew that the Martians were dangerous to Earth. How they knew this is beside the point. The fact that the Martians were prevented from landing supports the conclusion. Now in what way were the Martians dangerous to us? Not, obviously, through force, since we were able to hold them checked with our weapons. What other way could they hurt us?" Larry stared about the circle of faces. "*They could only hurt us by physical contact.*"

"You mean — by infecting us?" Patience said.

"Yes, by infecting us," Larry said. "It's the only conclusion which makes sense out of this charade. Now, get back to us: we've been infected, in some manner. Five years ago — not 'several' or 'six or eight' — five years ago we were approached by strangers, by strangers who did us a kind deed so that they could spend time with us and do whatever was necessary to infect us with the disease they carry. And from that time on we've been in a decline."

"How the hell did they get here?" Macklin demanded.

"They must have landed secretly," Larry said. 'How, I haven't the slightest idea. But they landed, and they made carriers out of us, I'm sure. Now, they've picked us up again — why, I'm not sure. Perhaps we've carried a repressed virus for five years. Perhaps it needs a booster of some sort before it becomes contagious. Perhaps the booster has been in the food or drink they've given us. But of this I'm sure: they'll release us today as they promised, and we'll spread this sickness across Earth."

"It — it just doesn't seem possible," Patience said.

"But it explains what's happened," Larry said.

"Hell, I can think of a dozen explanations," Macklin said. "It's just a question of guessing."

"Okay, you give me one, not a dozen, but *one* explanation," Larry said.

Macklin gnawed his lips and was silent.

"What can we do?" Valerie asked uneasily.

"Well, that's something else again," Larry said. "But we can't think about it until we get my theory out of the pipe-dream class."

"Pipe-dream?"

"Sure. You all miss the obvious point. The facts only fit five of us. Five of us have something in common. Macklin doesn't support the theory. If he tested out we could assume I was right, and try to do something about it."

"You mean there's something to be done about it?"

"Yes, I think so," Larry said.

"Well, get at it, for God's

sake," Valerie cried shrilly.

But Larry shook his head. "Only if my theories fit all of us, only if we can know that what happened to five, also happened to six. Then the guess-work is cut way down. If we were all infected by strangers — then they almost must have been Martians." He paused, then said quietly, "What about it, Macklin?"

Macklin stared at them, wetting his lips. "This is preposterous," he said. "It's full of guesses and maybes and perhaps. How do we know he's right?"

The answer to that was so obvious that he gave no one the chance to supply it. "Sure, you think if I — if I just agree with all of you . . ."

"Not agree with us," Larry said, shaking his head slowly. "We just want the truth."

Macklin massaged his forehead with the tips of his fingers, and then squared his big shoulders. "I've told the truth," he said loudly.

Everyone was silent, watching him.

"Why should I lie?" he yelled.

He got no answer.

The seconds passed slowly, squeezing themselves into history with painful deliberation. Macklin began to breathe very rapidly, his mouth hanging open like a man fighting for air in a smoke-filled room. Sweat broke out on his forehead, and his fingers were trembling.

A minute went by and then Macklin wet his lips. "I — I met a man five years ago," he said, in a low, shamed voice. "He helped me out of a bad spot. Okay, you've got the truth now. I stole money. I stole a helluva lot of it, because I'd made some bad investments and the bankers were going to wipe me out." He rubbed his forehead, glaring at them defiantly. "This man made up my losses. I shouldn't have let him, I know. It was all crazy. But I couldn't stand to fail. Everyone would laugh . . ." He turned away from them, tears starting in his eyes. "They always laughed at me . . . my father, kids in school. I wasn't a success — and I had to be, you see, because it hurt to be laughed at. Now you can laugh, you can —"

Valerie cut him off by impulsively kissing him on the cheek, and mussing up his hair. "You're not really a bad guy," she said, laughing. "You just take yourself too damn seriously."

"I — I started to stutter a few months after this man left me," Macklin said, dabbing at his eyes.

Everyone was grinning at him, even little Dickie and old Maria. He looked at them, sniffing, and then a sheepish smile appeared on his face. "Well, what's so funny?" he said.

Everyone was grinning at him,

"I'll be damned if I know," Larry said. "My point is proven, but we're still in a ghastly spot. But we're all together now — maybe that's what we're smiling about."

"You said you might do something," Patience said.

Larry frowned slightly. "Yes, I've got an idea. Now listen." . . .

That night as dinner-time approached Larry stationed himself at the revolving column which brought them their food. The others were in their rooms.

Larry stood quietly, trying not to think of what might happen if he had guessed wrong. There was no more time for speculation; this was a moment for action.

The column began to turn slowly, and he smelled the aroma of their dinner. When the column had completed a half-turn, Larry stepped forward, and spoke clearly into the slowly narrowing aperture.

He said: "Mars is in danger. I can help you. You have been tricked." . . .

Nothing happened. The column completed its revolution, stopped. The six trays of food were in their customary niches.

Larry walked to the center of the chamber, and said, "Okay, let's eat."

The others came out of the rooms, their eyes going to him hopefully, expectantly.

He shrugged. "We'll have to wait and see," he said . . .

That night he went into his room at the usual time and stretched out on the bed. He closed his eyes, and tried to go to sleep. But that was impossible. His mind was churning with fears and anxiety. The minutes were going by, and with each of them went a part of his hope. If anything were going to happen, it must happen soon . . .

Silence settled over the central chamber, the sleeping room. Everyone else was in bed, and Larry had warned them not to sir, regardless of what developed . . .

Time passed.

The first indication that something was happening came casually, without warning; a draft of air touched his face. That hadn't occurred before in this sealed, windowless prison.

He closed his eyes, breathed deeply and regularly. Only the strong, excited beat of his heart sounded in his ears. He thought irrelevantly, *I'm not afraid. Something is about to happen, but I'm not afraid. I must be crazy.*

He knew, a few seconds later, that he wasn't alone, that *something* had entered his room. There was a change in the atmosphere, a sensation of subtle motion in the air abut him, in the darkness of the room.

He did not know what to ex-

pect; but he should have known, he realized an instant later.

Something sharp dug into his arm.

This was the way it had happened the first time. There was no reason for them to change their procedure.

As hands touched him, he knew that he was losing consciousness . . .

Larry awoke in a brightly lighted room. He was half-sitting, half-reclining, in a low chair, and facing a blank white screen. There was a desk before the screen, and on the desk a telephone, a weirdly incongruous note in this fantasy of improbabilities. The telephone scared him as nothing had so far; its sturdy, functional look high-lighted and emphasized the terror in this situation.

A voice spoke in flat, metallic accents. "What can you tell us?" The sound seemed to come from behind the screen.

Larry wet his dry lips. *I was right, I was right,* he thought, and the shock of knowing that brought a cold, nauseous cramp to his stomach and dampness to his brow.

He sat up straighter in the low chair, trying to keep the excitement and fear from his face.

"You were tricked," he said. "Our government knew that you landed here, knew that you contacted and infected us. We were under surveillance during the past five years. They watched us night and day, knowing that eventually you would return."

There was a pause that lasted for several minutes. Larry found his breathing coming faster.

Then the voice spoke again. "Why do you do this?"

"I don't like my own people," Larry said. "I am glad to help you."

The voice didn't answer. Larry waited motionlessly, trying to control his nerves, as time passed. Once he thought he heard something — a faint booming noise above him — but it was impossible to isolate and classify.

Finally he got to his feet. "I'll do anything I can to help you," he said.

Again, silence answered him. He stood, staring at the screen for what he estimated to be at least half an hour, and then he sat down slowly.

What had happened?

After another period of waiting, he got to his feet again and glanced around. There was an open door behind him; the room was unfurnished except for the desk, and the bright, white screen.

He turned around, clenching and unclenching his fists, and then walked toward the desk, and looked behind the screen.

No one, nothing, was there. The screen concealed a closed

door. Larry tried the knob, but the door was locked.

He hesitated a few minutes, feeling the thudding hammer of his heart, knowing that he couldn't stand much more of this; he was suddenly terribly exhausted, and he had a powerful impulse to laugh. He knew intuitively what his laughter would sound like, and he knew that he would run forever to escape the sound of it.

He hurried to the desk and scooped up the phone.

A buzzing sounded in his ears.

He dialed Long Distance, and seconds later a cool, blessedly familiar voice, said, "Your number, please."

"Get me Washington, any government office in Washington," Larry said. The girl didn't understand this, and he had to keep talking to her, explaining it over and over again, and then, suddenly, he was talking to a man, to a man whose voice was calm but brisk . . .

The glass partition extended from floor to ceiling, from wall to wall. It separated a large, brightly-lighted, high-ceilinged room.

On one side of the glass wall were Larry, Patience, Valerie, Macklin, Dickie, and old Maria.

On the other were three men. Two were in military uniform, while the third, a kindly-looking man with gray hair, wore a black suit which needed pressing. He was smoking a cigarette and occasionally a dribble of ash fell onto his vest, but he paid no attention to this. He was talking, and had been talking for several hours, and his soft, good-humored voice was slightly hoarse.

". . . You would have been returned at about this exact moment, I think," he was saying. "We know what that would have meant. Well, now. I've been chattering long enough. You have something to discuss, I realize, so I'll leave you to it. Come along, generals."

The old man's name was Carruthers, and he was the chairman of an international committee so powerful that it superseded every other agency on earth, and so secret that the newspapers did not even suspect its existence.

When he had gone, trailed by the two highest-ranking officers in the United States Army, Larry looked at Patience, and, because she was beginning to cry, he patted her shoulder gently.

"I'm sorry as hell," he said.

"It's just not possible," she said, brokenly, through her tears.

"Damned meddling bureaucracy," Macklin roared. He paced the floor, glaring at the glass partition.

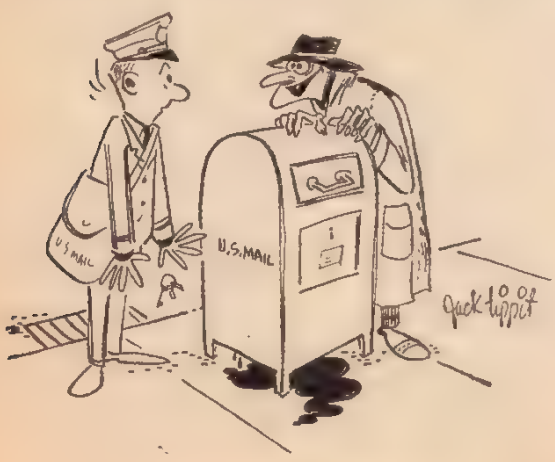
"And I've got a run-of-the-play contract," Valerie said. "Well,

Illustrator: Tom Knoth

let 'em sue," she said, and grinned. But it was gallow's humor, and a gallow's smile, and it fooled no one.

Carruthers had confirmed Larry's hypothesis. The six of them had been infected by Martians, and then kidnapped. They had been held in a practically inaccessible area of New Mexico, in dungeons constructed by the Martians during the past five years. When they had been led to believe that their plans were known all along, and that counter-measures had been taken, the Martians had blasted off, behaving as Carruthers had said, "with the precipitate and guilty unreason which characterize their mental processes."

Carruthers did not know the Martians' ultimate goal. To ravage Earth with their peculiar disease, and then conquer it? A possibility, but unprovable. The Martians were not numerous. They had intelligence, but it was vastly different from that of an earth-man's. In what exact way, he was not sure. They were like mischievous, but not necessarily evil children into whose hands an arsenal of enormously destructive weapons had fallen. Very curious . . .



"I forgot the postage"

"What the hell are we paying their salaries for?" Macklin said stridently. "They don't know a damn thing. We saved them, didn't we? And look what happens?"

Only Dickie and Old Maria seemed in fairly cheerful moods. She was telling him some story in Italian, and he was listening eagerly.

"It's sheer, bloody murder, kiddies," Valerie said, and now her eyes were damp. "I hate to go feminine on you, but I'm going to have a good cry."

Carruthers had explained to them that there was no antidote for the disease they had contracted. Earth scientists were working on it, but . . .

Meanwhile they would have to remain in isolation. Their families and friends would not know what had happened to them; they would have to accept their disappearance as the results of mysterious abductions. Everything would be done to make them comfortable. Books, newspapers, television — all of this they might have. Until such a time . . .

Carruthers hadn't finished that sentence. There was no need to.

"Well," Larry said, after a few minutes silence, "let's make the best of it."

"Bah!" Macklin snorted. "I might have expected some such Pollyannish optimism from you. You're going to take it lying down, I know. But not me. I'll fight, damn it. I'll get lawyers —" He stopped, frowning. "Well, I'll get *some*thing," he said weakly.

They were all silent. Then Patience said, "I think Larry's suggestion is sensible. After all, what else can we do?"

Valerie sighed. "I wonder how well your excruciatingly good sense is going to wear, dear."

"I'll try not to impose it on you," Patience said, coloring.

Valerie grinned and patted her arm. "Just tell me to go to hell when I sound off that way."

Dickie drifted away from the group then, and Maria followed him, smiling.

"I think we should draw up a list of the things we'll need," Patience said.

Larry was standing beside her and, without thinking about it, he put his arm about her trim shoulder. "That seems sensible," he said.

She looked at his hand, and then up into his eyes, and there was a bold little smile on her lips. "Yes, that's very sensible, Larry."

"Well, I didn't mean —" He stopped then and rubbed his jaw. "Maybe we could add a minister to our list," he said.

Macklin looked puzzled for an instant; but then he began to beam mightily. He turned to Valerie, who put a hand to her forehead and said, "Oh, God, *no!*"

"Well, damn it all," Macklin said in an injured voice. "I'm human, too."

"You're married," Valerie cried in a straw-clutching voice.

Macklin's jaw fell. "Yeah, that's right," he said, after a pause. Then he brightened. "But I'll be legally dead in seven years, you know."

"Well, we'll talk about it then," Valerie said, and strolled toward her room with the languid grace which had stirred audiences in half the theatres in the world.

Macklin stared after her unhappily.

Patience, from a pleasurable place in Larry's arms, looked at him and was touched by the misery in his face. "Mr. Macklin," she said, winking solemnly, "she's human, too."

"Why, that's true," Macklin said in a wondering voice, and hope began to dawn in his face.

After a bit he began to chuckle.

Don't take it to Heart

By H. L. GOLD

Maybe they don't go in for it any more; but when we were young (not *as far back as the Civil war!*), *kids used to leap over lines in the sidewalk, chanting, "Step on a crack; you break your mother's back!" And they didn't step on a crack, either. Mothers were respected in those days.*

A lot of nonsense, we're told now. Let a psychoanalyst hear that today, and he fumbles at his pince-nez and mumbles something about "compulsive behavior patterns," and starts oiling up the old couch. Then they fetch in little Willie and give him the works to cure his neurosis, and he's so normal nobody can stand him!

But can we be quite sure that a label marked "obsession" is the answer? What if such superstitions have a basis in fact? Anybody around here want to take a chance of crippling his mother?

MEN who come into a shoe store are usually meek and apologetic, which may explain why Eliot Grundy had remained head salesman at Footfitter Shoes for over twenty-five years. A small, fussy man with glinting eyeglasses and white hair combed flatly and precisely over a growing bald spot, he had a surprisingly big, authoritative voice. When he announced bluntly that a customer ought to take a certain shoe, that shoe was as good as bought.

Mr. Cahill liked to watch Grundy sell, and he especially liked to show Saturday extras how it was done. Mr. Cahill was the store manager, had been since two years before Grundy came there, but he knew he couldn't, as he put it, hold a candle to Grundy's masterful selling.

"Now watch this," he said one day to a salesman named Barnes, who, as a matter of fact, never made the grade. "That gentleman wants a wingtip shoe in cordovan leather. Listen to Grundy handle him."

"It bites in front," the customer complained, standing up and flexing the shoe several times. "Could you put in a bite pad?"

Illustrator: R. Harrington

"I could," Grundy said in his astonishing voice. "But I won't."

"Huh?" asked the customer and Barnes, both startled.

"If that's what the guy wants," Barnes continued to Mr. Cahill, "why shouldn't Grundy fix up the bite for him?"

"He knows what he's doing," said Mr. Cahill. "Listen."

"I don't get it," the customer said bewilderedly. "If you charge for bite pads, that's okay."

Grundy hitched forward on his salesman's stool. "Not with me. Here, sit down." He lifted the customer's left ankle while the man was still standing, dumping him into a seat, then unlaced the shoe swiftly and shoved it hard against the sole of his foot. "All right now, let's see why it bites. Did you ever think of asking yourself that question? Shoes don't bite without a reason, you know. If they do, it's because *the last is all wrong for the foot.*"

The customer swallowed uneasily. "It is?"

"Wingtips are too narrow for you. See how this shoe tapers to a point?" He stopped and glinted his eyeglasses at the man. "Your feet don't come to a point, do they?"

"Well, no —"

"And cordovan is as hard and stiff a leather as there is. You have sensitive feet, don't you?"

"Well, yes —"

Mr. Cahill turned to Barnes with a smile of pride in craftsmanship. "There you are. The sale's wrapped up."

But it wasn't. The customer allowed Grundy to try on a pair that he thought was suitable, even walked around in them and confessed they were more comfortable. But he half-defiantly asked to try the others again.

"I'll take these," he started to say, and then saw Grundy's lips compress disapprovingly. "You — you think I ought to take the ones with the broad tips?"

"I do," stated Grundy.

The customer sighed. "Oh, all right. They look lousy, but at least they feel good."

Grundy, wrapping up the package, favored him with his tight end-of-a-sale smile. "That's the important thing, isn't it?"

"I guess so. Well, sure! Why should I pinch my feet into narrow shoes —"

"Where the last is all wrong," Grundy supplied.

"— yeah, just so people'll think I have narrow feet? Hell with them. My comfort comes first," the customer said belligerently, justifying a decision that had been forced on him.

"I'll be damned," Barnes said, standing at the entrance to the stockroom with Mr. Cahill.

"You've seen a master at work, Barnes," said Cahill almost reverently. "Never forget this mo-

ment and the lesson you've learned."

But Mr. Cahill had his troubles with Grundy. It was fine, of course, to have a salesman who never missed a day at work, who never came in late, who always kept the floor around his stool tidy — "Put away the shoes as soon as you take them off," Grundy was fond of saying forcefully, "and besides not littering the place, you don't get customers confused about which pair to buy." Grundy was a demon on stock; he hated to see it upset — although "hated" is perhaps too mild a term — he always went into a rigidly controlled rage and let customers wait until he had the stock back in shape again.

That was one thing that upset Mr. Cahill. He believed that the customer always came first. Grundy, on the other hand, argued that disorganized stock ruined a salesman's efficiency.

"How can a man sell if he doesn't know where things are?"

"But there's always time to straighten out the shelves *after* you've finished a sale," Mr. Cahill pointed out.

"I can't work that way."

"Grundy," said Mr. Cahill, more than once, "there's a customer out front. You will please go out and wait on him."

"Is that an order, sir?" Grundy would ask ironically.

"It is."

At first, Grundy used to head uncertainly for the entrance to the stockroom, glance back at the unfinished stock, and then halt, visibly fighting his desire to straighten up and his reluctance to follow that specific command.

"I'll be through in a few minutes," he'd mumble. "You go."

Then there was Grundy's refusal to try on a right shoe first. Every so often, somebody says to the salesman, "My right foot is bigger than the left. I'd like to fit that one first." And salesmen, Mr. Cahill held, should be happy to oblige a customer in so small a matter.

"But the shoes aren't put that way in the box," Grundy obstinately said. "The right shoe is under the tissue paper. It's the left one that comes out first."

"So take a little longer putting them back."

"That is not how I learned to sell shoes, Mr. Cahill: first the left shoe, then the right. I don't mind putting *both* of them on a customer, but I won't go fishing the right one out of the tissue."

He never did, either.

There were many more ways in which Grundy refused to budge, and Mr. Cahill sometimes thought seriously of getting rid of him. But those occasions were only temporary crises, which Grundy always won by sticking to his rigidly set ways, and Mr. Cahill,

after cooling off, realized that a salesman of Grundy's caliber should not be fired just because he won't change his methods. If not for Grundy, he had to admit, the store would have trouble meeting its sales quota.

But that was only part of it. Mr. Cahill had studied Grundy over the years, as he felt any good manager should in order to get the best out of his help, and he understood just what was the root of Grundy's trouble.

"I'll drive you home," he said once, when they were locking up for the day. "I want to talk to you about something."

Grundy's sudden distress would have been invisible to anybody else, but not to Mr. Cahill. He said, "But I always go by subway."

"That's what I mean," Mr. Cahill declared. "You always this and you always that, as if there's only one way to do something. Now come on, pile into the car. It's not far out of the way for me."

Grundy looked around as if cops with drawn guns were closing in on him. "No. I mean — no, thanks. I'll take the subway. It's — ah — faster."

"You're not in any hurry." Mr. Cahill held open the door, but Grundy stayed where he was. Ignoring the people passing by, Mr. Cahill said, "I want to help you, Grundy, and I think I can. I've made a study of psychology — that's how I got where I am — and I know what makes a human being tick. You're not ticking, Grundy. You're sticking at half-past."

"I'm not complaining," Grundy replied. "If you're dissatisfied with my work —"

"No, no. It's not that at all. You're — well, you're inflexible. You act as if something awful would happen if you changed your ways."

"Things wouldn't get done right," Grundy said stubbornly.

"They would. Maybe better. You're *afraid* to change. What do you think would happen if you took off the right shoe first, for instance? The customer might die? You might? The floor would cave in? *What?*"

"I'm late," said Grundy. "I have to get home. Things to do —"

He hurried toward the subway. Mr. Cahill, getting moodily into the car, thought he had lost again.

But Grundy was disturbed by Mr. Cahill's shrewd analysis of his fixed behavior pattern. He was no less forceful with customers, yet he wondered if his doing things without variation was merely a question of training. Without even Mr. Cahill being aware of it, Grundy tried a minor experiment — he started lacing a shoe by slipping one end of the lace through alternate holes and

then going back to do the same with the other end, instead of painstakingly working one hole at a time from side to side, as he always did. He'd considered it a better, more conservative way, one that did a neater job, but now he wasn't sure and he wanted to be.

He didn't exactly *do* it. He started or, rather, he *thought* about starting. But his hand began to shake and he felt the pressure of terror mount alarmingly in him. Something frightful would occur if he did it — it was as if the walls and the ceiling bulged threateningly at him, daring him to go on.

"If you don't mind, I'm in a hurry," the customer said, and Grundy, relieved to find an excuse, swiftly laced the shoe as he invariably did.

He tried leaving the stock to wait on people; even, when he was asked, to put on the right shoe first; but panic rose in him each time. He knew nothing would happen. He knew it, he knew it, he knew it!

He knew nothing of the sort, only that there was a ghastly sense of fear, a feeling that disaster was daring him to do something differently. He said nothing to Mr. Cahill, but he stopped experimenting. It was much more comfortable. And somehow safer, like taking the match away from a bomb that might blow up himself, the store, customers and Mr. Cahill.

Mr. Cahill, however, neglected to notice Grundy's anxious tries and relieved relapse. A memo had come from Mr. Munson, the president of the company, and Mr. Cahill was worried about it. He knew there would be trouble with Grundy. He attempted to head off the explosion.

"You know," said Mr. Cahill, in what he hoped was a casual tone, as he and Grundy sat at the back of the store after the lunch-hour rush was over, "more than half of the people in the world are women!"

"Anybody who rides in a subway can tell you that," Grundy replied with his usual rancor.

"That's an awful lot of shoes, even figuring one pair each."

"And a lot more selling time. You can wrap up five sales to men in the time it takes to sell a woman."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Mr. Cahill objected jocularly. "It takes a little longer, perhaps, but just think how many customers!"

"Somebody else can wait on them. I wouldn't."

Mr. Cahill tried to change Grundy's attitude by breaking it down a little at a time, but he didn't have that long. When Grundy came in on a Monday morning — exactly five minutes early, as always — and went back to the stockroom to put away his

jacket, Mr. Cahill stood holding his breath, his entire body stiff, waiting for the blast.

"Mr. Cahill!" Grundy's voice was bigger and more terrifying with indignation than Mr. Cahill remembered ever hearing it before. "May I ask the meaning of this — this *sacrilege?*"

Mr. Cahill filled his lungs and straightened his back and went into the stockroom, where Grundy was glaring at shelves of narrow boxes.

"What's the idea of this, Mr. Cahill?" Grundy demanded. "These are *women's shoes*, aren't they?"

"Why, yes," Mr. Cahill said innocently. "I thought you understood from our conversations that —"

"So that's what you were driving at! Turning Footfitters into a damned female shop!"

"It wasn't my idea," Mr. Cahill said. "Orders from the office."

"Well, they're not going to make me sell women's shoes. As of right here and now, I quit, Mr. Cahill. I'll find another man's shoe-store, and when that one starts selling to women, I'll find another."

He was outside, glowering at the display the window dressers had put in over the weekend and which he'd missed seeing when he came in, probably because the windows were changed so seldom, before Mr. Cahill caught up with him and grabbed his arm.

"Grundy, this isn't fair to Footfitters," Mr. Cahill said in outrage. "You haven't given notice. Are you going to leave Footfitters in the lurch on *opening day* — you, the head salesman, the one we were counting on to put us across?"

"Well — "Grundy began hesitantly, sounding like one of his own former customers.

"Of course you're not! You've been loyal to Footfitters all these years. I can't believe you'd be disloyal at the last moment."

"All right," Grundy capitulated. "I'll help out — but only as far as taking care of men customers goes."

It was Mr. Cahill's first victory and he knew better than to push further. Grundy went back to the stockroom, muttering at the slim boxes, and changed his coat. He stood at the back and watched sourly as women came pouring into the store, eager to buy something and get the free pocketbook or stockings Footfitters was offering. He made no attempt to help the extras, naturally. Mr. Cahill knew he would not go front until a male customer entered, which seemed good enough until the store was mobbed and women were screaming to be waited on.

"Mr. Grundy," said Mr. Cahill tentatively, "I wish you'd jump in just for today. We just can't

handle the crowd. And what if Mr. Munson should drop in and see you standing there?"

"Well, what if he should?"

"I know you don't care any more, now that you've decided to leave Footfitters, but think of my career, Mr. Grundy. You know what the office would say — and do."

"That's your affair," Grundy said. "I'm not budging from here until a man customer comes in."

"And you know none will as long as we have all these women here," Mr. Cahill said in a high and despairing wail.

"I know it."

"Then how do you figure you're helping me out?"

Grundy turned his hostile view of the alien invasion of the store to Mr. Cahill. "I'm a man of habit, as you yourself observed. I like routine, in spite of your ideas about why I do things certain ways. I've lived my life the way I was brought up to, doing certain things in certain ways at certain times, and I don't want to change that for you, for Mr. Munson, or for anybody else."

He didn't mention that he had attempted to change his habits and the overwhelming panic he had experienced. He knew better; Mr. Cahill, being an amateur psychoanalyst, would have told him it was because of rivalry with his father or his rebellion against early toilet training or something equally annoying and preposterous.

"That, Grundy, is compulsive behavior," Mr. Cahill said severely. "A compulsive neurotic does what he does because he's afraid of the consequences if he does or doesn't. I mean it's like defying your parents, so to speak, and fearing punishment."

"Nuts," replied Grundy, a word he had previously only thought.

"What do you think would happen if you waited on a woman?"

Grundy's aggressive composure shook slightly. Remembering what he'd suffered in his abortive experiments, he had been trying not to think of that. "I don't know," he admitted.

"Then why not find out? You'll see it's not so terrible." Mr. Cahill caught him by the wrist and hauled him toward a seat, where a stout woman was sitting impatiently. "Here is our head salesman, madam. He'll take care of you personally."

"Well, thank goodness *somebody* will," she said in a peevish voice. "Or will he? What's he standing there for, like a *goon?*"

"Go on, Grundy," Mr. Cahill said in an urgent whisper. "She won't eat you."

"I am not afraid of her or anybody else," Grundy said with

(*Continued on page 162*)

THE GLASSES

By CHARLES LARSON

As far back as the dawn of history, when the first teller of tales earned his keep in front of cooking fires, audiences have thrilled to an account of some mythical hero who could foretell the future. The thought of being able to read tomorrow's news today captivates us all; and a host of soothsayers, from some sweaty swami in turban and loincloth, to the impeccable Mr. Pearson and his famous column, have eaten high off the hog by scratching this universal itch.

Which is why we feel most readers will like this story. From the moment Poulson discovers his eyes are troubling him, until he looks into a stateroom mirror and learns his fate, this weird account of second-sight unfolds with all the ponderous power of a Greek drama. Mr. Larson is an author new to us, but we hope he will continue to write fiction as exciting as The Glasses.

POULSON was thirty-eight years old when his eyes began to bother him. He was a large, even-tempered man with a deep pride in his physical well-being, and it irritated him remarkably to think that his body should begin to betray him so very early in life. He always had gone out of his way to take care of himself. He made it a point to swim at least once a week, and he spent a great deal of time on the golf course. For years he had played tennis regularly, and had, as a matter of fact, met his wife on the courts. He had been attached to the Piedmont Club as a tennis teacher in those days. The romance between Louise and himself had been straight out of a woman's magazine story. He the poor but handsome tennis pro; she the bright and beautiful heiress. Complication? The heiress's parents, who objected violently to the marriage. The happy denouement? An unfortunate accident that killed the parents gracefully

Illustrator: W. Ashman

and without fuss. Louise had become Mrs. Michael Poulson six months later. And Poulson had never again lifted his hand in manual labor.

Which isn't at all the same as saying he never again worked. In terms of man-hours consumed in keeping his handsome body strong and fit, Poulson worked very hard. He felt that Louise expected it of him. Furthermore, he was clever enough to be able to understand Louise's point of view. He was extremely grateful for her money, (his allowance was unlimited — Louise wasn't at all petty that way), and he considered it only fair to repay her as best he could. If she had preferred him to develop his intellect instead of his muscles, he would have worked just as hard in that direction.

The difficulty — as Poulson saw it — was that physical fitness depended to such a great extent upon youth. Each passing year brought him closer to decay, to the inevitable paunch, to the sorry slackening of his flesh. It had become more and more difficult to slosh through the pool, and he had lately been forced to cut his golf from thirty-six holes a day to eighteen. He doubted that Louise had noticed the difference yet, although she *had* begun to twit him mildly about his weight.

She had, moreover, mentioned a desire to take up badminton. Poulson had offered to teach her himself, but Louise had refused. Upon investigating, Poulson had discovered that the badminton teacher at the club was a twenty-five-year-old Irishman by the name of Karney, a big, well-proportioned youngster with a smile as broad as his shoulders. That day Poulson had played his thirty-six holes of golf for the first time in weeks.

But renewed exercise was a make-shift thing at best. He couldn't renew the years. Someday Louise would slip away from him as easily as his birthdays had. And he'd lived too long with Louise's money to be able to live without it now.

He knew, of course, that Louise had made a will in his favor. In his day-dreams he often thought of the luck he'd had when Louise's parents had been killed. Soon his dreams had taken another step, and in them Louise, too, always met with an unfortunate accident. He was bitterly ashamed of these dreams after he dreamed them, but they continued to return. . . .

It was at this point that the further worry of his eyes had come to plague him.

The trouble had manifested itself first as a series of small nagging pains high above his temples. These had joined at last into a spear-head of torture be-

hind his forehead, and had been followed by a number of dark specks that danced like blown pepper before his eyes whenever he grew tired.

For a while he fought it. He cut down on his reading, and he allowed his eyes a rest at odd times during the day. He found that a cool, wet handkerchief across his eyelids would give him momentary comfort. But the pain inevitably recurred after the handkerchief had been removed.

Then one afternoon, while he was walking from the eighteenth green to the clubhouse, he had been caught in an instant of brief but utter blindness. White and shaken, he had continued on to the locker room, and had telephoned an eye specialist at once.

Three days later he had his examination. He sat in a darkened room and the doctor shone tiny, needle-like beams of light into his aching eyes, and finally the decision was given him.

"Nothing organically wrong," the doctor said. He snapped on the overhead light and leaned back in his chair. He was a round, pink-faced man named Moorehead. He peered shrewdly at Poulson from behind steel-rimmed spectacles. "The pain is caused by a recurrent spasm of your eye muscles. Knotted up in there like a boxer's biceps. Happens sometimes. Psychosomatic, very likely."

"Psychosomatic? Doesn't that mean it's all in my mind?"

"Oh, good lord, no. No." Moorehead pursed his lips. "The psychosomatic illness begins in the mind, yes. Or rather, the mind causes it. But the pain is absolutely physical and true." He picked up a pen, began writing on a slip of paper. "Have you been worried — very worried — over something recently, Mr. Poulson?"

The dark dots jumped giddily before Poulson. He had a terrifying mental picture of Louise in the arms of the young badminton player, Karney. "Why, no, I don't think so," he said easily. "No worries at all."

"I see." Dr. Moorehead folded the piece of paper, handed it to him. "Well, we'll try these and see what happens. It's a rather odd prescription. But I think you'll get a measure of relief. There's an optician on the ground floor. If you haven't one of your own, I can recommend him highly."

"Glasses," Poulson said flatly.

"Oh, you won't have to wear them all the time. Reading, mostly, I should say. Come back when the glasses have been made, and I'll check them for you."

Poulson rubbed his eyes, then rose. "All right, Doctor. Thanks."

He left silently.

And that was the beginning.

So slight, so average, so ordinary. He took the prescription to the optician, Cornish, who promised him delivery on the following Wednesday. For five days Poulson suffered through a rising scale of agony so intense that he forgot his objection to glasses entirely. He could think of nothing but the potential relief in store for him, and when Wednesday came and the glasses were fitted, he was so grateful he could have cried. The alleviation was immediate. It was as though a soft and soothing balm had been laid upon his eyes. The tiny spots were gone. He could almost feel his taut muscles unwind. Moorehead's suggestion that he use the glasses only for reading seemed ridiculous now; Poulson was determined to wear them constantly, no matter what Louise's reaction might be.

Buoyantly he went back to Moorehead's office for the checking process. And then a very odd thing happened.

The spots returned.

He was looking at Moorehead at the time, laughing, and the discovery hit him like a fist across his heart. He shut his eyes and turned his head away.

"Something wrong?" Moorehead asked.

"Well, I —"

Poulson opened his eyes. He glanced slowly around the room. Clarity met him everywhere. Relieved, he swung again to Moorhead. And there the spots were.

Poulson wet his lips. The spots, it seemed to him when he examined them more carefully, were quite different than they ever had been. They were larger, and they didn't dance about. He was still pondering over them when Moorehead moved, and it was only then that he saw the truth. Because the spots moved, too. They were, indeed, on Moorehead's face. Poulson let his breath out happily.

"Good lord," he said, "you had me scared to death."

"I did?" Moorehead replied. "Why?"

"There's something on your face. I thought my eyes were acting up again."

Moorehead stared at him oddly. He walked to a mirror, peered into it. "On my face?" he said. "Where?"

"Why — all over it. On your forehead. On your cheek . . ."

Frowning, Moorehead looked back at him. "Spots?"

"Well — as a matter of fact, they appear to be sores. I mean —"

"Take your glasses off," Moorehead said.

Obediently, Poulson did so. The sullen ache began in his temples. But when he raised his eyes to Moorehead's face, he could find no sign of the marks that had been there before.

"Still see them?" Moorehead asked.

"No," Poulson said slowly.

"Let me check these things." Moorehead took the glasses from him and disappeared into his inner office. Puzzled, Poulson sat down. With the glasses gone, his eyes had begun to pain him again. He closed them tightly.

In a moment Moorehead was back. Angrily he said: "I'm sorry about this, Mr. Poulson. It doesn't often happen. But this is just the reason we always ask our patients to return for a check."

"I don't understand."

"I don't want you to blame Cornish. My prescription was a rather unusual one. He's made a slight mistake. Hardly important, but in the long run —"

"A mistake? In those glasses? I've never had so much relief in my life."

"Nevertheless, you're seeing spots where there are none."

Poulson took the glasses, put them on once more. And it was true. Through the faulty glasses Moorehead's face again became mottled, covered with the tiny sores.

"I'll call Cornish," Moorehead said. "You can stop by on your way home. And I know he'll be as sorry about this as I am."

But Poulson was hardly listening. A nurse had come into the room. And her face was clear. There were no spots. There were no spots anywhere but on Moorehead's face. He didn't understand it, but he knew that he would not give up the glasses. Not now. Not when he had relief for the first time in months.

He muttered something, nodded to both Moorehead and the nurse, and left the room.

It was just past noon and the streets of the city were crowded. Poulson made his way slowly toward the parking lot where he'd left his car. He found himself glancing surreptitiously at everyone he passed, in an effort, he supposed, to find out whether or not the sores reappeared on any face but Moorehead's. He thought he saw them once on the face of a newsboy, but he couldn't be sure. The boy was standing in the center of the street, holding his papers up toward the cars in the lanes on either side of him.

Paulson hesitated. At last he searched in his pocket, found a nickle.

When the youngster had turned again toward him, Poulson raised his arm. "Paper!"

The boy nodded, started toward the sidewalk. He was a slim kid with yellow hair. A cripple, Poulson realized. Furthermore, he'd been right about the spots. As the boy neared him, Poulson could see that they literally covered the sharp, small face. They were larger than those of Moorehead, and deeper. Poulson's stomach

moved uneasily and he gulped.

Eagerly the kid shuffled across the street. Suddenly the blast of a horn cut across the normal street noises. Poulson jerked his head around, started to open his mouth. But the words he shouted were lost in the scream of brakes, the shriek of tortured tires, and the final, terrible smash of metal into living flesh. He felt stunned, unable to move. Between the shifting bodies surrounding the newsboy, he managed to catch a glimpse of the kid's face. The spots were still there, through the mask of blood, but even as he watched they changed, widened, grew.

And abruptly Poulson knew them for what they were. The marks of corruption, of decay and death.

He whirled, walked rapidly away, and deep inside of him nausea bit at his stomach, and he held his mouth tightly closed against the acrid taste in his throat. . . .

It was nearly four when he arrived home. He had ridden aimlessly around the city until the mental image of the newsboy had lessened a little. He had deliberately driven all thought of the strange marks from his mind in an effort to avoid analyzing them. But a suspicion had formed despite everything he could do to prevent it, and the suspicion was so wild, so insane, so grotesque that his rational mind refused to credit it.

It had occurred to him that the flaw in his glasses might somehow allow him to see the sly, savage lines that death drew on a condemned face. He might possibly have a rigidly defined view of individual futures, which would be a gift so ugly that the threat of it again made his stomach turn.

He wanted no one's death. Not the newsboy's. Not Moorehead's. Not . . .

Not Louise's? his mind whispered.

He turned into his driveway, noting automatically that an unfamiliar car was parked before the house. He drove into the garage, got out, and walked slowly into the backyard.

It was an immense yard, well-kept and hidden from the surrounding houses by a thick laurel hedge. Louise was sitting in one of the lawn chairs. She looked up, her burnished golden hair bright in the late afternoon sun. "Well, Michael! You're home early." Her voice was high and louder than usual, but Polson hardly noticed. His eyes had gone immediately to her face, and the smooth, unmarked piquancy of it both relieved and vaguely disappointed him.

He became aware then that Louise was still speaking. And he became aware of other things.

The slow movement of the candy-striped swing, as though someone had gotten out of it too hurriedly. The sense of strain in the atmosphere. And, finally, the young man sitting with nervous nonchalance on the other side of the patio.

Karney.

"You know Pat Karney," Louise was saying. "I had a badminton lesson. He drove me home. He —"

Heavily Poulson walked toward the Irishman. "Wipe off your mouth."

Karney darted a glance at Louise, got out his handkerchief and rubbed it across his chin. He stared silently at the lipstick traces. He was still looking at the handkerchief when Poulson jerked him upright. He tried to twist away, but he was much too slow. Poulson's first blow caught him across the nose, raked downward to split open his lip.

Poulson continued to hold him, continued to hit him. A dreary job, sullen, almost apathetic. And when he was through — when the blood from Karney had begun to spray onto his own shirt — he pushed him aside. "Now, get out of here. And if I see you again I'll kill you. I mean it."

Karney was gasping through his torn mouth. He stumbled to his knees, got up and moved away, out of the yard.

Slowly Poulson turned to Louise.

Her voice snapped at him like a better whip. "I suppose I'm next. Surely your dramatics won't stop with Pat. You're the outraged husband, Michael. Remember? But speaking of killing — if you so much as lay a hand on me —"

"I won't have to."

"What?"

Poulson felt very tired. He let his eyes drop from Louise's face. He had seen what he'd wanted to see. The marks were very fine across her white forehead. Very tiny. But they were there.

He headed for the house. He didn't bother to wonder why they had appeared so suddenly. Deep, deep inside him an evil gladness lay. Louise was going to die. And — perhaps — she would die without changing her will. It was possible. It was very, very possible. . . .

During the days that followed, an armed truce sprung up between Poulson and Louise. They grew exceptionally polite to each other, and extremely cool. They continued to live under the same roof, but each of them followed his own path. Whenever Poulson glanced at his wife through the glasses, the disfiguring sores had grown a bit bigger.

On the following Thursday he read about Moorehead in the

paper. It was a short item, set back in the obituaries.

> Dr. Daniel J. Moorehead, prominent local optometrist, collapsed at his home late last night. Death, which was instantaneous, was attributed to coronary thrombosis. Dr. Moorehead was a member . . .

Poulson put the paper aside. He was not surprised. It was as though he had heard of the death long ago and had already adjusted accordingly.

He began, sensibly, to think of the funeral arrangements he must make eventually for Louise. She was, he knew, seeing Karney again. The fact no longer bothered him. He made inquiries as to the travel rates to Europe. After the funeral he determined to go to Paris for a while, then perhaps to Italy. He intended to put Louise's money to good use.

Then something happened which worried him badly.

He discovered that Louise had been in contact with her attorney. When he asked her about it, she told him frankly that she planned to divorce him and marry Karney. "And Michael, dear," she added, "you might as well know that you're not going to get a cent out of me. Not ever again. Beginning, my darling, right now."

Abruptly, the marks on her face spread like a malignant disease. It was at that moment that Poulson realized why they had come at all.

She would certainly die. But *he* was the deciding factor. The sores had begun because *he* had planned to kill her. As his resolution grew, so did the marks. It was up to him, and because the spots were there he could not possibly back out. It all had been set from the beginning.

Suddenly he rose, walked to the mirror over the mantel. If he killed Louise, couldn't he expect to be hanged in return? And if the course — unchangeable now — had been taken already, wouldn't the same sores be in evidence on his own face?

He raised his eyes slowly.

He could see the reflection of the room — the spotted face of Louise staring at him in bewilderment — the tremor in his head.

His complexion was utterly unmarked.

He drew a deep breath, began to laugh softly.

"Michael?" Louise said.

Still laughing, he said, "It's all right, my sweet. Everything is all right."

He knew that Louise's eyes were following him as he left the room, but he couldn't stop laughing. It made the murder too simple. He touched the glasses gratefully. Almost without thinking, he knew exactly what he would do. . . .

On the following day Louise came to him while he was shaving. She leaned against the door and smiled secretly at him. Poulson glanced at her, but the yawning depth of the sores caused him to turn away again at once.

"Michael, dear," Louise said, "I have some awful news for you."

"Oh?"

"I've just had a call from my lawyer. He's drafted a new will. He wants me to drop by this afternoon to sign it." She paused, and the slight smile played about her lips. "I know how disappointed you must be."

"It's your money, my angel."

"I'll want the car at three. I'm going to the hairdresser's right now."

"Whatever you wish," Poulson said.

Louise smiled at him for a moment longer, then walked silently away.

Poulson rinsed off his razor, wiped his face. He was quite calm. Louise wanted the car at three, which meant that he still had a comfortable margin of time.

Unhurriedly he dressed, waited until Louise had left.

He rummaged through the tool chest in the basement until he found a hack-saw, then he strolled into the garage where the car was waiting. When he left the garage finally, the tie-rod controlling the steering wheel had been nearly severed. A strong twist of the wheel would be adequate to snap it. As it happened, the boulevard leading from their home to the main part of the city had been built with an eye toward beauty, toward showing off the city from above. A dozen sudden views were available, and the graceful turns in the highway took advantage of all of them. Unfortunately, some of the curves were annoyingly sharp. . . .

He cleaned himself up, chose a book, and began to read.

Everyone was exceptionally kind, from the young couple who discovered the broken, twisted car, to the compassionate patrolman who reported Louise's death to him. They wanted him to understand that she had died quickly, that there couldn't possibly have been much pain.

"Yes," he said, and "thank you," and "no, I'm quite all right. . . ."

He wept a bit, but bore himself bravely at the funeral, which everyone agreed was lovely. The Irishman, Karney, was there, and Poulson realized with a kind of puzzled, amused wonder that the younger man must honestly have loved Louise. He smiled at Karney for no reason, but Karney walked quietly away. And Poulson thought: yes, he knows what happened.

(*Continued on page 89*)

Illustrator: R. Castenair

THE WISHING STONE

By IVAR JORGENSEN

Meet Mr. Henry Bobbet Crimp, a resident of Westchester County, New York. A good many wealthy people live there, as well as a few four-flushers, but Henry has nothing to do with the latter. His home occupies a modest piece of ground near the Long Island Sound, and one of his simple joys is to sit in the shelter of a tree and look at a large gray rock in his garden.

Now there's something of a story in connection with that rock. It began the day a new shop opened near Henry's office, with a single item on display. The item was this rock; the price was exorbitant. Naturally, Henry was no fool; he wouldn't pay good money for a hunk of ordinary stone. Then, you ask, how did it get in his garden? Well, it's like this . . .

IT WAS a small, unobtrusive store front on Park Avenue in the lower fifties. For this reason alone, it came under the daily scrutiny of Henry Bobbet Crimp. Henry Crimp had been walking the seven Park Avenue blocks from Grand Central to his interior decorating establishment and back again, for many years.

Having an eye for detail, Henry kept a pretty close check upon things along his route. When Madame Jeanne placed a new gown in her window he always gave it his critical attention even though he had never met Madame Jeanne nor had any desire to do so. When T. Carrozotti arranged a particularly attractive display

in his candy store, Mr. Crimp adjudged it from the street and silently commended the confectioner.

Thus, Mr. Crimp was well aware of the vacancy just above 50th St. on the west side of Park, and he was favorably impressed, one morning, to learn it had been rented. This, because Mr. Crimp felt a business recession was long overdue, and vacant store-fronts vaguely frightened him.

He paused to note the quiet gold lettering with which the window had been inscribed. It informed him that one Samuel Hobart had taken over. Mr. Crimp complimented Mr. Hobart — by remote control — for his courage in taking on this sizable business obligation, then stopped short at sight of what the window contained.

A rock. Nothing but a huge, gray rock, placed somewhat back from the glass, resting upon a very low platform, probably to keep its rough surface from marring the expensive carpet. A chaste, white card rested on the ugly thing. Done in the same quiet mood of the window lettering, it read: *Wishing Stone, $3,000.00.*

Mr. Crimp was shocked; doubly shocked because he was hit from two directions. The ungainly boulder grated upon his artistic sensibility, and the very nature of the offering outraged his business sense. Samuel Hobart was a madman, he decided. Or at the very least, eccentric beyond all permissible boundaries. A strange situation indeed.

He noted that the store was sparsely stocked and skimpily furnished. The stone was obviously Mr. Hobart's sole item of inventory. And, aside from two straight backed chairs and a floor lamp, the place was bare.

Mr. Crimp moved on up the street. He arrived at his own well-stocked, establishment and was warmed by its comparative aura of prosperity. But, by mid-afternoon, he found another reason for resenting Mr. Hobart. He discovered his mind had dwelt with such tenacity upon the new Park Avenue enterprise, that his personal problem of the moment had been crowded completely out. This, Mr. Crimp resented wholeheartedly. He felt his problem had priority, based both on seniority and urgency. It wanted thinking out and was certainly entitled to it over and above idle wondering how a man expected to sell a table-sized lump of rock for three thousand dollars.

Mr. Crimp's problem had to do with a newly discovered flaw in the title to his Westchester estate. It was not a large estate as they went in that area, but neither was it a sharecropper's cabin, and it was entirely adequate for Henry

and Bella Crimp who asked only for a couple of trees and a few square feet of turf upon which to place a sundial.

One of Mr. Crimp's very infrequent mistakes in life had been a neglect to get a guarantee upon the title to his country place. Thus, when the flaw was discovered — a neighbor claiming legal ownership to a sizable section of the Crimp front lawn — Mr. Crimp found himself in a precarious position, what with a resourceful title and trust company backing the neighbor's claim. Mr. Crimp had turned the matter over to a lawyer, but continued to contribute his own personal capacity as a worrier.

So, when thoughts of the wishing stone interrupted this, Mr. Crimp was annoyed. He resolutely put them from his mind, but that afternoon, on the way to Grand Central and the 5:36, he found himself hurrying over the first lap of the journey to discover whether or not the stone was still there.

It was. Mr. Crimp stared at it, shook his head in disapproval, and went on to catch his train. That night, he told Bella about it, but she was busy worrying about the faulty title, and her reaction was extremely mild.

A week passed, during which time Mr. Crimp walked — twice each business day — past the absurd boulder. And toward the end of that week, he was surprised — nay, mildly amused — to discover his attitude toward it had changed. Imperceptibly, it had taken on a personality of its own. In some vague way, Mr. Crimp felt sorry for the rock sitting there in the incongruous environment forced upon it — as alien to Park Avenue as Madame Jeanne's dress shop would have been alien to a Canadian lumber camp.

So, in the middle of the following week, when Mr. Crimp entered the shop of Sam Hobart to satisfy his curiosity, he felt he had a certain right to do so. His was not the inquiry of what is vulgarly termed a sucker. His entrance upon the premises was justified by personal acquaintance. At least that was what his subconscious mind told him. Otherwise he would never have allowed himself to call upon Sam Hobart.

The man who came through a curtained doorway as Mr. Crimp entered, was tall, well dressed, and of excellent appearance. He smiled and said, "Good day. May I serve you?"

"My name is Crimp — Henry Bobbet Crimp. I own the antique shop farther north. Perhaps you've passed it."

"Indeed I have. I am Sam Hobart — at your service."

Mr. Crimp searched for words. He hadn't realized that giving formal expression to his curiosity would be at all difficult. "I — I

pass here often on my way to the train. I've seen your — stone. I've — I've wondered what it was."

Sam Hobart's reply was direct but not in the least offensive. "The card is self-explanatory. The object is a wishing stone."

"I see, but I — I don't quite understand."

"It's very simple, really. One sits on the stone and makes a wish." Sam Hobart shrugged. "The wish comes true. Thus the stone is a very valuable item to have in one's possession."

That was a little too much — hearing it stated so baldly. "Come now," Mr. Crimp said, smiling. "You don't really believe that."

Sam Hobart's eyes widened a trifle — that was all, but it was enough. It registered just the right amount of polite amusement; a strangely disinterested amusement for a man interested in selling a three-thousand dollar rock. "It isn't a matter of belief or disbelief. One doesn't doubt the existence of — say, the Moon. One is able to see it." Sam Hobart gestured again. "It is as simple as that."

"Not quite," Mr. Crimp said, with some spirit. "One cannot — I mean the Moon is a different proposition than sitting on a rock and wishing."

"Not at all." Sam Hobart took Mr. Crimp gently by the arm and moved him seven steps to the right. "Sit there — please," he said — and still with the mild amusement of an adult speaking to a child. "Now, think of your most pressing problem and evince a desire that it is solved in your favor."

This, Mr. Crimp did without even concentrating. In fact it would have been impossible for him to keep from doing it, so close to his heart was his most pressing problem.

Sam Hobart did not give him a chance to translate any resentment into action by springing up from the stone. By the time Mr. Crimp's reactions functioned, Sam Hobart had lifted him erect, much in the manner of a person helping another from the depths of a dentist's chair.

Mr. Crimp had never felt more of a fool. He said, "I suppose there will be a charge for this," then immediately regretted his sarcasm. It was, of course, extremely undignified.

But the sarcasm was lost on the cheerful Sam Hobart. "None whatever," he said, heartily. "As a matter of fact, you are welcome to use the stone anytime — until it is sold, that is. Anytime you have a problem, please don't hesitate to drop in."

With that, Sam Hobart turned and left the room. Mr. Crimp stared at the doorway until the curtains were still. Then he looked for a long moment at the stone.

Later, on the 5:36, he angrily rejected any suggestion of unreality concerning the incident. It had been nothing more than an oversized wedge of pure bosh. He had been justified in satisfying his curiosity, he told himself stoutly, and Sam Hobart's act had not fooled him a bit. Mr. Crimp knew his second visit would be the signal for an all-out, high pressure sales talk.

As his train ground to a stop, he remembered certain of Hobart's words: "— until it is sold, that is." Hobart had been so matter-of-factly confident. Did the man actually *believe* it himself? Mr. Crimp wondered as he drove home from the station.

He had decided not to tell Bella of the incident, but this resolution was abandoned when he arrived at the house, found Bella waiting at the door, and got the full import of her news.

"The place is ours, darling. The lawyer called. You're to call him back, but he told me what it's about. The place is ours."

Mr. Crimp phoned and got the details. They added up to the fact that the big title and trust company had given up on trying to pull the Crimp land out from under the feet of Henry and Bella. It seemed their title was pretty solid after all. So solid the title and trust people would be glad to guarantee it for a ridiculously small sum. The lawyer told Henry the company's decision had been made only that afternoon, and word had been relayed to Bella immediately.

After a dinner, which was in the nature of a celebration, Henry told Bella of the wishing stone incident. He told it lightly, ready to laugh with her — ready, in fact, to lead the laughter. But Bella didn't join in. She was pensive, thoughtful. Later, she asked, "Dear, do you think the stone had anything to do with it?"

"Of course not. A coincidence. Nothing but a monstrous coincidence."

Bella sighed. "Certainly, dear. It had to be. But it *was* strange, wasn't it?"

Henry admitted it was and later they went to bed, entirely happy with their success.

The next morning, Henry Crimp stopped in front of Sam Hobart's wishing stone shop. He extended his hand toward the door — then drew it back sharply and hurried on. He was darned if he would! He was darned if he'd give Hobart the satisfaction.

But his resolve lost to temptation on the homeward trip. He entered the shop and, as before, Sam Hobart appeared from the outer room. He smiled and said, "Ah — you got your wish promptly!"

Mr. Crimp had expected an I-told-you-so attitude, but somehow, this wasn't it. Hobart could

have been a shoe clerk saying, "Ah — I'm delighted you liked the riding boots." No gloating. In fact nothing but a polite, slightly bored interest. Not offensively bored, however. Sam Hobart was obviously a sincere — if very strange — person.

"How — how did you know?"

Hobart smiled and turned palms upward. "My dear sir —" Then he shrugged as though inviting the intelligent Crimp's sympathy for having to deal with Crimp the fool.

"It could have been nothing but coincidence," Mr. Crimp said — said it almost desperately — said in essence: *Please agree with me. For heaven's sake man! Let's not go off the deep end.*

Hobart's manner changed. He frosted over — just a trifle — and looked through Mr. Crimp rather than at him. A touch of varnish appeared in his smile. "I'm glad you made use of the stone," he said. "Please feel free — as I told you before — to come in and use it any time — as long as it is here. And now if you will excuse me."

Mr. Crimp stared after Hobart and in his mind was a stark question. Why hadn't the man done the obvious thing? Why hadn't he tried to sell the stone? It was obviously for sale. There was a price tag on it. The time was certainly right. Mr. Crimp had every right to expect a sales attempt. He'd been cheated out of it and he resented such treatment. He was a logical prospect and was thus entitled to resist being sold; to laugh at Hobart for even making the attempt.

Mr. Crimp felt cheated. In his frustration, he turned upon the rock itself. Time to discredit this hoax once and for all, even though it did not deserve the dignity of discredit. Glancing around, he stepped quickly toward it and sat down as he had done the previous day. A wish? That took a moment's thought. What was there to wish for. Oh, of course. That atrocious Italian chair he'd paid too much for. Sitting in the window for two months. An excellent thing with which to end this silliness. There couldn't be a single individual in New York who would want it.

Mr. Crimp wished fervently for the sale of the chair. Then he got off the rock, glanced around again — guiltily — and went home.

The note was under his door the next morning; neat feminine handwriting on the back of an envelope:

Dear sir:

The Renaissance chair in the left side of your window will balance out a room I am furnishing. Please do not sell it until I return around noon.

Helen Epperson,
New Haven, Conn.

"At least," Mr. Crimp mused, "I was right on one thing. No one in New York wanted it."

But he drew slight satisfaction from the quip. A vast irritation encompassed him and he could not shake it off. It increased when Mrs. Epperson arrived somewhat out of breath and paid the list price without hesitation.

That afternoon, he deliberately avoided looking at the stone as he walked toward Grand Central. At home, he was preoccupied to a point that brought comment from Bella during supper.

The next morning, he was extremely annoyed when his train daudled outside the station before pulling up to the platform. When the train stopped, he was standing in the vestibule waiting to leave — something he had never done before — and when he got to Sam Hobarth's window, he was surprised and shaken to find himself out of breath. Now really — this was absurd.

But his self-condemnation was blotted out by the knowledge that the stone was still there. No one had bought it. His sense of relief alarmed him to a point that he hurried on up the street as though ecstacy were ahead or peril behind him. He got to his own place of business, but did not enter. Instead, he turned and went back to the place of the wishing stone. He entered. Sam Hobarth appeared from the curtained doorway as though he were attached to strings manipulated by the opening of the front door.

"I want to buy it," Mr. Crimp said.

Sam Hobarth neither smiled nor frowned. He registered neither surprise nor disappointment. He asked, "Where would you like it delivered?" and waited for an answer.

"I have a place in Weschester, Mr. Crimp said. He clawed a checkbook from his pocket and wrote rapidly. He handed the check to Sam Hobart who accepted it as though it were the fiftieth he'd received on that particular day.

"If you'll leave your address —" Hobart said.

Sam puzzled over how he'd break the news to Bella. It wasn't the money. He had plenty of that, and the expense hadn't bothered him a bit. But Bella might — He decided on the light, casual approach and introduced the subject that night with: "You know, a peculiar thing happened today. I passed the window on Park Avenue that has that silly wishing stone in it and I discovered I'd formed a sort of sentimental attachment to the thing —"

Bella was eating her melon. She cut out a yellow chunk and said, "We can put it at the foot of the garden where that tree blew down last year."

Mr. Crimp let well enough alone.

The next morning the window was empty and Mr. Crimp experienced an odd sense of loneliness as he passed it. Obviously Mr. Hobart delivered early.

A second wishing stone never appeared in the window. Mr. Crimp watched for it and watched also, for Sam Hobart. Sam Hobart never appeared in the window either. But, two weeks later, Mr. Crimp came by the shop to find the door open and a short, frowning man just emerging from the curtained sanctuary. Mr. Crimp entered. The stranger eyed him without cordiality and asked "Who are you?"

"My name is Henry Bobbet Crimp. I am an antique dealer. My place is on up the street."

The stranger grunted and shuffled through some papers he may or not have picked up in the other room. "You knew Sam Hobart?"

"I was on speaking acquaintance with him," Mr. Crimp replied with some reserve.

"A rock peddler," the stranger grunted.

"Has Mr. Hobart left?"

"He left. We caught up with him in Pennsylvania. That was one of the states wanted him. They threw him in the can."

Mr. Crimp blinked. "He's in jail?"

"Yeah. High class confidence man. One of the best." The man poked a thumb in his own direction. "Me — name's O'Hara. Sergeant on the local bunko squad.

"I'm glad to know you," Mr. Crimp said.

O'Hara was in the mood for talking. He said, "Yeah — smart operator — Hobart. Now this rock selling idea — it took brains to figure that one out. Yet it's simple — so damn simple it's pathetic."

"I'd think," Mr. Crimp said weakly, "it would be rather difficult to — to sell a large rock."

O'Hara's frown deepened. "Not at all. Look at it this way. There are eight million people in this town — right?"

Mr. Crimp nodded mutely.

"All right. In a couple of weeks at least a half a million of them travel up this street. Just rough figures."

"Of course. Just rough figures."

"Out of that number, a quarter of a million will stop and look — maybe get a yak and walk on — most of them — but if the thing sits in the window long enough, a good many thousand will eventually come in to satisfy their curiosity."

"But —"

"Hobart's been dumping these rocks at about the rate of one a month around the country. Out of the ones that come in, he'll get a hell of a lot of them to sit down on the rock and fifty percent of

'em will get their goddam wish. It's strictly mathematical."

Mr. Crimp smiled weakly. "I'm beginning to see what you mean."

"A baby could see it. It's nothing but the process of elimination. Out of them that sits down, a percentage will get two wishes — three — four in a row. And one of them will have all the qualifications — a place to put the damn thing — money to buy it — and will be enough of a sucker. You see Hobart's only looking for one customer in millions of people. You take millions of people and somebody will buy anything — and I do mean *anything*."

Mr. Crimp felt unusually warm. He said, "Thanks very much for explaining it to me. It seems ironic that Mr. Hobart went to the — ah, rockpile for selling a rock." Mr. Crimp smiled, rather proud of his quip in a modest way.

It went over the officer's head. "We didn't get him for that. We'd need a complaint from the guy that bought the rock and them suckers don't squawk much. We nailed him for selling a money making machine last year over in Jersey."

"Thanks again," Mr. Crimp said. "I must be running along —"

"Of course, if the sucker that bought this one would make a beef, we could probably get his money back for him —"

"Good day," Mr. Crimp said, and hurried from the shop.

That evening, Mr. Crimp went to the foot of his garden and stood looking at the wishing stone. After a while, he sat down on it. He smiled. There was a certain quality of sheepishness in the expression, but it *was* a smile.

The Glasses

(Continued from page 79)

In time Louise's lawyer filed the original, favorable will. Poulson found that he was worth, after taxes, some eight or nine hundred a month, even though he never touched the principle. He sold the house, got himself an apartment, and reserved a first-class passage to Europe.

On the second evening after embarking, while he was dressing in his stateroom for dinner, a steward brought him the passenger list. Idly, Poulson ran his eye down the pages. He saw his own name, and a few others he knew, and one more. *Karney, Patrick.*

Thoughtfully, Poulson put down the list, bent forward a little toward the mirror on his door, and then stared silently at the rash of spots along his forehead. . . .

THE MAGIC ENDS AT MIDNIGHT

By ROBERT TERRALL

Are you tongue-tied at the wrong moment? Can you think of scathing retorts when the only ears listening are your own? Are you concise, clever, confident and cool along about the time your audience has walked out and you're crawling into bed?

Spencer MacDonald was that way. The girl he loved looked north when he was standing south, and his boss regarded him as a cretin. Then, one day, Spence caught a cold. Instead of staying in bed with a dull book, he put on his rubbers, buttoned up his overcoat and walked out of the house — into a world where Turkish pharmacists take their prescriptions from the Arabian Nights, and Time plays repeat performances!

SPENCER MacDonald, for nine years a valued employe of the Cosgrove-Regal Typewriter Co., pushed his way to the front of the crowded bus.

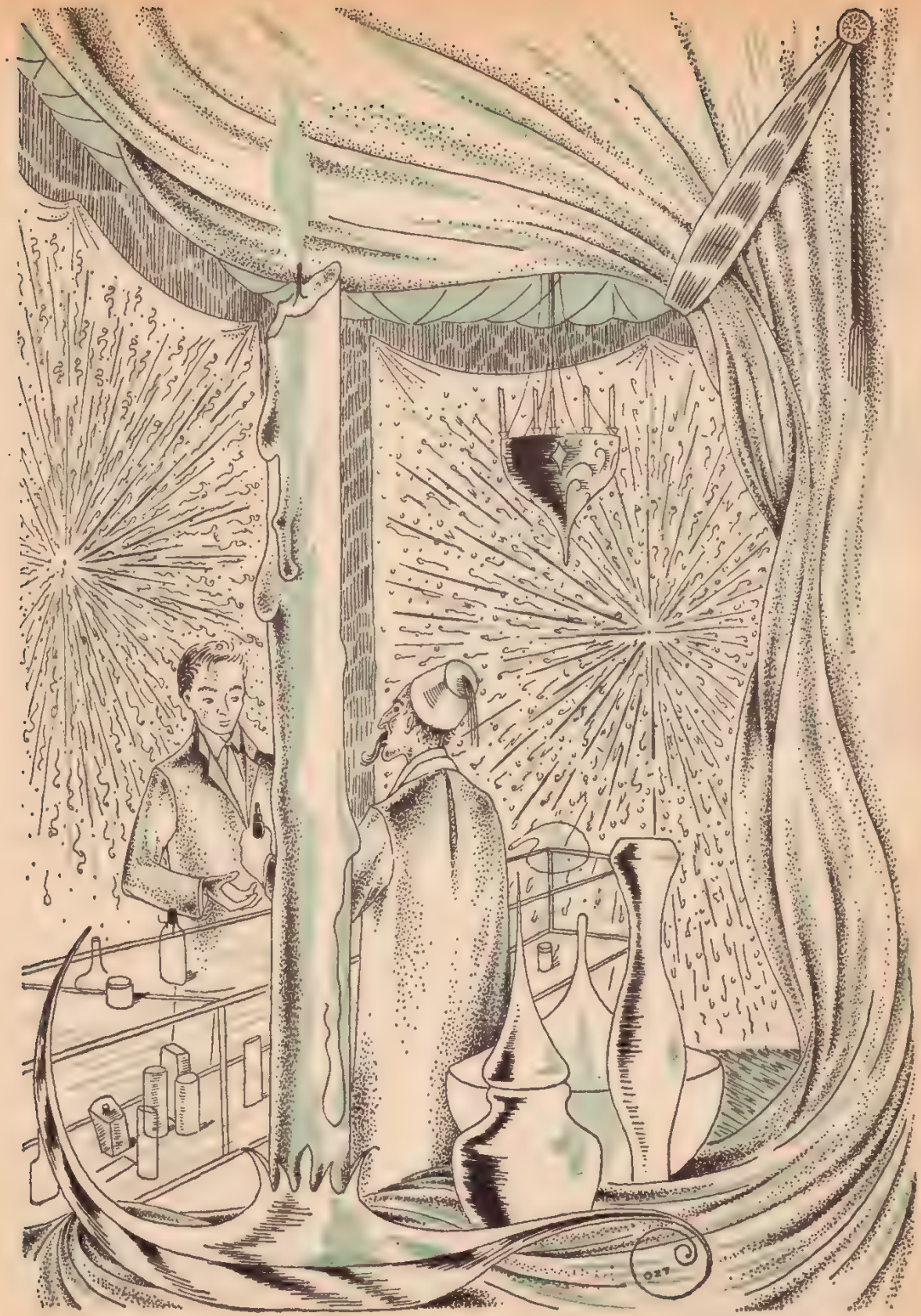
"Next stop, driver," he said.

The driver was a large, red-faced man, obviously irritated almost beyond human endurance. He pulled in to the curb but did not open the door at once.

"Been to the oculist lately?" he asked.

"Why —" Spencer said.

As a matter of fact, he had been to the oculist only a month before, to be fitted with a slightly stronger pair of glasses, but that was cer-



Illustrator: Orel Tucker

tainly none of the bus driver's business.

The driver pointed to a large sign above the windshield, and in the loud, clear tones of an adult addressing a backward child, he read it to Spencer. "*Please — leave — by — center — door!*"

Someone snickered; prickles of embarrassment raced up and down Spencer's spine. "Sorry," he said miserably.

With a disgusted sigh, the driver opened the door. In Spencer's confusion he dropped the book he was carrying, a heavy volume entitled *The Romance of the Eastern Mediterranean.* He picked it up, collided with a fat woman who was trying to climb abroad before he was out of the way, and reached the sidewalk.

Spencer watched the bus drive away. In an encounter with a public servant he had come off second best, as usual. He knew what he *should* have said. He should have said, "Yes, I have been to the oculist lately, and he has corrected my vision to twenty-twenty. As a result, I am able to see fifteen people between me and the center door. I can also see without straining my eyes that you are not cut out for this line of work. Your stomach is probably giving you trouble. I advise you to look around for some other way of making a living before it is too late. Please open the door."

That was the way it was with Spencer. Brilliant, crushing retorts never occurred to him until he no longer had a chance to use them. He had been slower on the uptake today than usual because he was suffering from a heavy cold. He was bundled up in a winter coat, muffler and rubbers, though it had been a pleasant April day. Really, he should not have gone to work at all. He would take some aspirin and let his mother bring him supper in bed. Maybe he would feel better tomorrow.

He had emptied the aspirin bottle that morning, he remembered; he would have to buy some. In his present condition, he didn't feel up to the noise and bright fluorescent lighting of the corner drug store, but halfway along the block was a dark little pharmacy, a survivor from a more leisurely age. Huge flasks filled with a mysterious purple fluid reposed in the window; there was a modest inscription on the glass — Shafeek Touma, R. Ph.

A muted bell, tripped by the opening door, announced Spencer's entrance. Underneath a silver coffee-making apparatus on the counter a small, intense flame was blown backward in the draft. Shafeek Touma, a fragile old Turk with a perfectly bald head and a face like wrinkled suede, arose and bowed. He said something Spencer did not understand.

"What?" Spencer asked.

"I beg your pardon," Shafeek Touma said. "I was speaking Turkish. It is rare indeed for any but compatriots of mine to enter my humble shop."

"I'd like some aspirin tablets," Spencer said. "A hundred."

"Certainly."

The old Turk handed him the bottle, took the dollar bill Spencer gave him and put it in a drawer. He counted out the change on the counter — four singles and some silver.

"I only gave you a one," Spencer said.

"Oh, no," the Turk said. "I remember distinctly. You gave me a five."

Spencer looked in his wallet. "I always know exactly how much money I have with me. I had twelve dollars a moment ago. Now I have eleven."

Shafeek reluctantly picked up the four singles. "As you say," he said philosophically. "I see you have a bad cold."

"Terrible."

"Sit down," the old man said, waving him to a high stool. "Have some Turkish coffee. To meet an honest man is always a refreshment to the spirit."

Spencer sat down, suddenly feeling extremely weak. The Turk had already opened the spigot of the coffee pot and was filling a small cup without a handle. "Please," he said, sliding the cup across the counter toward Spencer.

It was sweet, thick, and not very hot. Either the shop or Spencer's head had begun to revolve rapidly. "I've often wondered about this place," Spencer said: "How do you manage to stay in business, with a Walgreen's across the street and a Rexall's on the corner?"

Shafeek Touma smiled sadly. He was running a string of amber prayer-beads from hand to hand. "Sometimes I wonder myself. It is a miracle. Nowadays even many of my countrymen buy their headache remedies where there is noise and confusion and a soda fountain. They come to me now only for my specialties."

"What sort of specialties?"

"Various," Shafeek Touma said vaguely.

Spencer drank more coffee. He was feeling definitely peculiar. "Strangely enough," he said, "I've been hoping to pay a visit to your country. The company I work for is sending a man to Istanbul. We're putting out a new line of typewriters with a Turkish keyboard."

Shafeek Touma raised his hands in amazement. "To Istanbul?"

Spencer was not sure what was happening. He never gossiped about office affairs outside the office. From the semi-darkness, Shafeek Touma's soft black eyes, full of wisdom and compassion, drew him on.

"I applied for it two weeks ago. I hope I'm not being boastful when I say that I'd be the best man for the job. But after what happened today I suppose I don't have much chance at it. Don't you sometimes wish you could play back everything you've said during the day, rub out some things and dub in others? I always do that at night before I fall asleep. I'm actually fairly witty, though I'm the only one who knows it. Well, thanks for the coffee."

Shafeek's eyes sharpened. "What are you taking for this cold?"

"Just aspirin. Why?"

The Turk opened a cabinet and took out a small green bottle. "Try some of these nose drops. Five drops in either nostril."

Spencer stood up. He certainly was not going to be bullied into buying any nose drops merely because an old man had listened to him sympathetically and given him a tiny cup of coffee. "I never take nose drops."

"Take these," Shafeek said. "Without obligation. If they satisfy you, pay me tomorrow. I am curious myself to know how they work. They are a preparation of my own."

Two sparks of light, reflected from the flame beneath the coffee pot, danced in the Turk's eyes. After a brief hesitation Spencer took the bottle and walked out of the shop.

His mother met him at the door of their apartment. "Get right in bed," she said. "I'll bring you a tray. And you're going to stay home tomorrow if I have anything to say about it."

"I don't think I can, Mother," he said, "but I'll see how I feel."

As he was dropping off to sleep, he played back the conversations he had taken part in during the day, and made the necessary alterations. In this new version, somewhat younger than his true age, with all his hair, he was never at a loss for an expression. He was occasionally caustic, at other times wise and understanding, always in command of the situation. Charlie Mann, the firm's star salesman, who could talk his way into Fort Knox with a stick of dynamite and a bushel basket, was always abashed and silent. Spencer's secretary, Miss King, always looked at her boss with affection and respect.

Miss King, a lovely, competent, dark-haired girl with a brisk manner, occupied a disproportionate place in Spencer's secret thoughts considering the fact that during business hours he treated her rather formally. As an employer-employee relationship, it was fine, but Spencer knew he would never meet another girl like Miss King, and he wished he had the courage to tell her so. When he went over a day for the second time, as he was doing now, he thought of the

wonderful opportunities he had let slip, to tell her how nice she looked and to ask her to dinner. In his imagination, he had often commented favorably on her eyes, her figure, the painful and delightful way she made him feel. That was in his imagination. In real life, most of the things he said to her she took down in shorthand.

She had been present when Spencer had made such a fool of himself that noon. Mr. Cosgrove, the head of the firm, had called a luncheon conference in the officers' dining room to discuss the Export Division's forthcoming expansion into the Near East. The first item on the agenda, an unscheduled one, had been a report from Mr. Cosgrove himself on an ice-fishing trip he had recently made to northern Minnesota. The slaughter of fish, to hear Mr. Cosgrove tell it, had been terrific. Charlie Mann had topped this with a tribute to a wily trout he had outwitted in Canada the previous summer. Spencer, who had never in his life had a fishing-rod in his hands, had listened with resentment.

"I was reading a magazine article about the striped-bass derby on Cape Cod," he had said. "You'll be interested in this, Mr. Cosgrove. It seems —"

"Yes," Mr. Cosgrove had said. "Another time, Spence, if you don't mind. We've got a lot of work to cover."

And so it went throughout lunch. At one point Spencer had made an unthinking remark about the language barrier their man would be up against in Turkey — Turkish, he had always heard, was difficult to learn.

"That may be," Charlie had said, "but I understand most people out that way speak French. *C'est une bonne chance, n'est-ce pas*, Spence? *Je pense que tous les Turques parlent aussi Français.*"

"Where'd you pick up *that* lingo, Charlie?" Mr. Cosgrove had asked.

"I was stationed in Paris after the war. *Quelle jolie ville!* Plenty of temptations in that town." And he added to Miss King, "You understand that when I was off-duty I spent all my time at the Red Cross."

"Oh, I'm sure you did," she had said, meaning that she was sure he had never once set foot in the place.

"Believe me! Ask Spence. I used to run into him there all the time."

Spencer, as Charlie was surely aware, had never been sent overseas, which was one reason why he wanted this trip to Turkey. "You never saw *me* in the Red Cross," he had said, trying to adopt Charlie's tone. "Not in Paris."

It fell very flat.

After the conference was over, Charlie, Miss King and Spencer

had waited together for the elevator. Spencer had felt dispirited.

"Like me to bring you a present from the Turkish bazaars, baby?" Charlie had said, addressing Miss King.

Not in a thousand years would Spencer have been able to call Miss King baby; he had been trying unsuccessfully for some time to work himself up to the use of her first name, which was Sandra.

"That would be nice, Charlie," she had said, "but don't do anything extravagant."

"Don't worry about that. I'll hide it away in my expense account."

"I was under the impression," Spencer said stiffly, "that Mr. Cosgrove hasn't decided yet who is going to Turkey."

"Oh, it's sure to be Charlie," Miss King had observed. "Otherwise he wouldn't have been asked to the conference."

"Why sure," Charlie said.

"Well, if you do go," Spencer said, "I'll be the one who okays your expense account, and I've got a keen sense of smell. Bear that in mind."

"In that case —" here Spencer thought Charlie had winked at Miss King, though he might have been mistaken — "I'd better start cultivating you. A pal of mine on the Examiner gave me four ringside seats for the fight tonight. Why not get yourself a date and come along with us, Spence?"

Spencer looked at Miss King. She had a date with Charlie? To go to a prize fight, to sit in the middle of a howling mob while two men tried to batter each other into insensibility above her?

"What do you say, Spence?" Charlie said.

"No, I'm afraid I couldn't," Spencer mumbled. "This cold —"

Then the elevator door slid open. "Going down," the operator said.

As the elevator floor dropped away beneath him, Spencer fell asleep. But suddenly he awoke with a start. He had forgotten the nose drops.

In the next apartment someone was listening to the fight on the radio, the same bloody exhibition being witnessed by the girl Spencer loved. He fumbled his feet into slippers, found the small, unlabelled bottle in his coat pocket and took it to the bathroom. Five drops, the Turk had said. Spencer filled the dropper. He tilted his head and squeezed the bulb.

There was a violent explosion just behind his eyes. The floor bucked and almost threw him. What in heaven's name was *in* this stuff?

Then his head cleared for the first time in three days. He felt normal again, even better than normal. Shafeek Touma really had

something here; it would make a fortune.

Spencer's eyes had not returned to focus after the shock, and he misjudged the distance to the medicine cabinet. The bottle shattered in the wash-bowl. He could not bother with it now; he would clean it up in the morning. With a remarkable sensation of clarity and power, as though he understood everything there was to know and could win the heavyweight championship of the world using only his left hand, he returned to bed. The noise from his neighbors' radio had subsided. He fell asleep at once.

By morning the effect of the nose drops had worn off; he felt the same as he had the morning before. Terrible. His mother urged him to stay home, but with the Turkish trip still not definitely assigned, he didn't see how he could. His mother insisted that he wear his rubbers and winter coat, though it was clearly going to be another nice day. He kissed her dutifully, bought a paper at the corner and boarded a bus. He was cutting it close, as usual; he didn't have time to stop for another bottle of nose drops. The smashed bottle, he remembered now, had been gone from the wash-bowl when he woke up — his mother must have taken care of it.

He glanced at the headlines. Several wars, he saw, were continuing in different parts of the globe; the statesmen were insulting each other as usual in the United Nations; more officials of the police department were trying to explain how they had managed to save $50,000 a year on a salary of $5000. In short, it was one of those mornings when there was nothing much in the paper.

Miss King had reached the office before him. She wore a dark green skirt, the color of her eyes, and a severe long-sleeved blouse, contrasting with the color of her hair. Spencer never grew tired of this combination, which she often wore. She came around her desk. "How's the cold this morning, Mr. MacDonald? I must say, you look awful!"

She had said something like this the day before, too, but Spencer was not offended; it showed that she noticed how he looked.

"It's not that bad," he said.

He started on his morning mail, and how he was feeling really bad. Sometimes the monotony of his job was more than he could bear. The same old stuff, day in, day out. One of these days they would invent a machine to do Spencer's job — quite a simple machine, he thought bitterly. He was assistant manager of the Export Division, chained to a desk while his subordinates roamed the far-off places of the world on expense accounts.

He only needed half his mind to dispose of routine matters. While he dictated, he wondered if he

would ever get up enough nerve to ask Miss King out for dinner.

"Will you have a sandwich sent up, Miss King?" he said when his desk was cleared. "I don't think I'll go out to lunch today."

"Don't you remember, Mr. MacDonald?" she said. "We're having lunch with Mr. Cosgrove."

"Again? I thought we disposed of just about everything yesterday."

She looked at him with a puzzled expression. "You had lunch sent in yesterday, Mr. MacDonald."

"No, no. I admit there's a buzzing sound in my ears and I may have a bit of temperature, but you surely aren't going to tell me I'm wrong in thinking that we had lunch with Mr. Cosgrove yesterday, Wednesday, April Seventeenth?"

As she continued to stare at him in the same perplexed way, his eye fell to the dateline of the morning paper. To his amazement, it said Wednesday April 17th.

"All right," he said, making an effort to keep his voice steady. "What time do you have?"

"Twelve-ten."

He checked his own watch. "We're synchronized. We'll move out in forty minutes."

"You'll bring the Turkish file, Mr. MacDonald?"

He nodded impatiently. She gave him a worried look and left. As Spencer took the Turkish folder out of his desk, he suddenly remembered the old Turk in the strange little drug store. He got up abruptly, walked around the desk, sat down again and opened the newspaper to the sports page. And there it was — a long story dealing with the middleweight championship bout to take place that night at the Colosseum.

Spencer concentrated. He heard the announcer's voice, coming from the radio in the next apartment, shouting louder and louder until the words were audible over the mad roar of the crowd. Now what had he said just as Spencer was about to take the nose drops? La Banco! By a knockout in the sixth!

Becoming more and more excited, he went back over the evening, his visit to the drug store, Shafeek's mistake with the change. Spencer had said that he sometimes wished he could have a second crack at a day like yesterday. With a weird, penetrating look, the Turk had asked about his cold. Spencer could not understand it, but it had happened. He had gone through a day for a second time, getting all the way to 12:10 without even knowing it!

He would think about that later. Now he had to reconstruct the conference yesterday, word for word. First there had been those disgusting fish stories, then Spencer had given Charlie a chance to show off his French. French!

Anybody could speak French. But how many people around here could speak Turkish?

He opened the phone book to the T's and found Shafeek Touma's number.

A woman answered; Mr. Touma was in the pharmacy and could not be disturbed.

Spencer groaned. "I have to talk to him! It's terribly important!"

"Well," she said. "I go see for you."

In a moment Spencer heard the old man's voice. "Yes? I am very busy."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Touma," Spencer said, "but this is your own fault, after all. I took those nose drops last night and I only just realized —"

"Nose drops?" Shafeek Touma said distantly. "Who is this, please?"

And for Shafeek, Spencer realized, it still was yesterday, and the nose drop transaction had not yet taken place.

"I can't explain now," he said, "but take my word for it, it's important. I have to know how to say something in Turkish, and I've only got a few minutes."

"Hold the line," the Turk said, suddenly agitated. There was a thump in Spencer's ear, then silence. When Shafeek returned his voice was more relaxed.

"I didn't get quite the reaction I expected," he said. "You would like to say something in Turkish? You wish to impress a lady?"

"In a way."

"To such a cause," the Turk said, "I am willing to contribute my services. What you need, perhaps, is a few lines of poetry." He spoke in Turkish briefly.

"That sounds fine. What does it mean?"

"In rough translation: 'Your eyes are like the petals of a lotus, your lips have the sweetness of the berry. I thirst, I am dying. Let me taste that sweetness.' "

"Good enough. Let's have it again slowly."

The Turk spoke the words carefully while Spencer wrote them down. Spencer read them back several times till Shafeek was satisfied with his delivery.

"One more thing," Spencer said. "Do you speak French?"

"But of course."

"I had a few years of the stuff in high school, but I don't know about my accent. See what you think."

Shafeek listened and told him what changes would make it sound a little more like French. Spencer thanked him warmly and said good-by. He had the speeches memorized by the time Miss King came for him.

"Are you sure you feel up to this, Mr. MacDonald?" she said. "I know they'd understand if you sent up word that you were much too sick."

"Nonsense, baby," he said. "I've never felt better."

Miss King gasped audibly.

Spencer's excitement mounted as the elevator carried them up to the executives' dining room. He was fizzing quietly, like a fuse attached to a Roman candle. Miss King eyed him warily.

When they had taken places at table and started on their shrimp cocktail, Mr. Cosgrove plunged into the story of his fishing trip. Both Spencer and Charlie waited. Spencer had the advantage of knowing where the story would end, and he beat Charlie to the punch.

"Did I ever tell you about winning the Wellfleet, Massachusetts, striped bass derby, Mr. Cosgrove?" he asked. Without pausing for an answer, he described exactly how the great fish had taken the hook, how it had fought and struggled and finally flopped up on the sand, exhausted but with respect in its eye.

Charlie's mouth had opened, giving him a moment's resemblance to the defeated bass.

"I never knew you were a fisherman, Spence," Mr. Cosgrove said.

Spencer flicked the ash carelessly from his cigarette. He said nothing more till it was time for his remark about the language difficulties involved in a trip to Turkey.

"Of course," he said when he heard his cue, "Turkish is usually considered a difficult language to learn. I've never had much trouble with it myself." He smiled across the table at Miss King and quoted: "Your eyes are like the petals of a lotus, your lips have the sweetness of the berry. I thirst, I am dying. Let me taste that sweetness."

"You speak Turkish?" Mr. Cosgrove said. He was frowning, as though the possibility annoyed him.

"I don't really *speak* it," Spencer said. "But a lot of Turks live out in my neighborhood. I've picked up a little."

In the silence Charlie observed that most educated Turks could also speak French. After Spencer's coup it sounded very feeble, but Spencer was not going to let him get away with a thing.

"Charlie, you faker," he said in French, shifting easily to the new language, "I know the kind of French you picked up in air corps public relations. It wouldn't sell any typewriters in Turkey for Cosgrove-Regal."

To Mr. Cosgrove, who now seemed thoroughly baffled, Spencer explained, "I happened to be in command of one of the first outfits into Paris." He chuckled. "You know, that's quite a town. Before the war was over I certainly got fond of the Paris Red Cross."

"Spence," Mr. Cosgrove said slowly, "when you spoke to me the other day about going to Turkey yourself, were you serious?"

"Of course. The job calls for more than the usual backslapping. You need someone with maturity and experience, who knows the typewriter business from one end of the keyboard to the other."

Mr. Cosgrove worked his lips thoughtfully in and out. All he said was, "Hmmm. Well, you may be right."

Later, waiting for the elevator, Charlie tried to rally. Spencer had been watching him closely and knew he was about to bring up the subject of his prize-fight passes. Spencer wipped out two tickets of his own.

"Look at these, children," he said. "Two tickets to Rigoletto. My cold is going to keep me in tonight, but somebody might as well get some use out of them. The Metropolitan won't be back for another year. How about it?"

"*Opera?*" Charlie said. "Are you kidding? Tonight's the La Banco-Blatnick fight, and if you're looking at television we'll wave to you from ringside."

"Rigoletto's not 'til Friday, is it, Mr. MacDonald?" Miss King said.

Spencer felt slightly guilty, because he had bought that second ticket for his mother, but he knew she wouldn't want to stand in his way. He looked at the date and pretended surprise. "Why, yes. I don't know what's got into me today. But I ought to be feeling better by Friday, Miss King. Would you like to go with me?"

"I'd love to," she said.

Going down in the elevator Charlie seemed so gloomy that Spencer relented a little. "Who do you think will win the fight tonight, Charlie?" he said kindly.

"Blatnick," Charlie said without enthusiasm. "Inside of five."

Spencer shook his head. "He hasn't a chance. Take my advice and put your money on La Banco."

"Why, that bum's likely to knock himself out climbing into the ring," Charlie said.

"That's an interesting point of view," Spencer said coolly. "Would you care to back it with — say twenty-five dollars?"

Charlie opened his eyes. "*Even money*? I should say I would. And if you have any more La Banoc money I can put you in touch with somebody who'll take care of you."

This presented a delicate problem. Would it be entirely ethical to bet on a contest when he was entirely sure of the outcome? "I'll let you know later."

Charlie got off the elevator when it reached his floor. Miss King said hesitantly, "If you don't mind my saying so, Mr. MacDonald, I wouldn't do that if I were you. The man he's talk-

ing about is Mike Mancuso."

"Mancuso? The gambler who's been bribing all those policemen?"

"That's the one."

"Then he ought to be taught a lesson," Spencer said firmly, and when the elevator stopped at their floor he told the operator, "I'm going on down."

He descended to his bank, closed out his savings account and bet it all on La Banco. He didn't understand the odds, but Charlie explained them to him — if La Banco won, which was a laughable idea, Mancuso would pay him twenty-four thousand dollars.

Miss King, holding his overcoat and rubbers, met him at the elevator. "Now I don't want any argument," she said. "I'm putting you in a cab and taking you home."

That lunch had taken a lot out of him, Spencer realized. He was exhausted. He let her help him into his overcoat.

"How about your rubbers?" she said.

"Don't *you* start that," he said sourly.

She came with him. He was exceedingly wobbly by now, and it was just as well that she was at his side to get him a taxi. He sank back in the seat and closed his eyes.

Miss King sighed with relief. "I think I've straightened everything out for you, Mr. MacDonald, but I'm glad I got you out of there before you got in any more trouble!"

Spencer sat up in alarm. "You don't mean you cancelled my bets?"

"Mr. MacDonald! Do you mean you actually went ahead and bet on that fight?"

"Twenty-four thousand dollars," Spencer said with satisfaction. "That's what I collect when La Banco wins. I can take a trip abroad next summer even if I don't get to go to Turkey."

"Yes, but —"

"There's nothing to worry about. He'll win by a knockout in the sixth."

She put her hand on his forehead. "You lie back and rest. You'll be home in no time."

The touch of her hand was cool and pleasant. "What things did you have to straighten out?"

"Oh, all that Turkish business. Luckily Mr. Cosgrove's secretary is one of my roommates. She'll tell him you had a temperature and didn't know what you were saying when you said you wanted to go to Turkey."

He sat up again. "But I didn't have a temperature! I do want to go to Turkey!"

"Now, Mr. MacDonald," she said soothingly. "You know you're not the type. Celia said that Mr. Cosgrove was considerably upset when he came back from lunch. He was even wondering if you

were the right man for the New York office — I didn't want to tell you till it was official, but he's been planning to put you in charge in New York. And then you made all those jokes at lunch, and it worried him."

"I distinctly heard him laugh!" Spencer said. "Several times!"

"Yes, but don't you see? All this time everyone has thought you were a certain kind of person — steady, reliable, shy, sort of wonderful —" She stopped, confused. "I'm getting mixed up. Don't you know what I mean?"

"Maybe I do have a temperature," Spencer said. "I just had the most extraordinary hallucination. I could have sworn I heard you say —"

Then he saw that she was blushing. "Why," he said, "that's wonderful! I didn't think you even knew I was alive!"

"Until you said those things to me at lunch, Mr. MacDonald, I wasn't sure you were."

"Call me Spencer. What things? You don't mean you understood what I said in Turkish?"

She lifted her face to his and spoke softly. "When my family came to this country their name was Kiral. That's Turkish for King."

So Spencer kissed her, and he found that it took no courage at all. It was amazing, the way things had turned out.

"This the place?" the driver said. "Or am I interrupting?"

"You are," Spencer said, "but we'll have no trouble picking up where we left off." And that, Spencer thought, wasn't so bad for the spur of the moment. "Wait here a minute, darling," he said.

The bell above Shafeek Touma's door tinkled as Spencer entered. The old man rose and bowed.

"Well, it was touch and go there for a while," Spencer said, "but it's worked out fine. I won't be going to Istanbul, it seems, but I'll be going to New York, and it begins to look as though my secretary may be going with me. And who knows? Maybe before long I'll be visiting Turkey on a honeymoon."

The Turk looked at him as if he had gone mad. "Beg pardon?"

Well, if that was the way he wanted to play it—Spencer sighed. "A bottle of aspirin."

"Certainly."

After paying the taxi, all Spencer had left was a dollar bill. The Turk put it in a drawer. Slowly and deliberately he counted out four dollars and some silver. For a second their eyes met. Spencer was in no mood for an argument about how much money he had had with him; he took the change.

"That's a bad cold," Shafeek Touma said, his eyes gleaming wickedly. "I have a powder I recommend highly, one teaspoonful to a glass of water."

"No, thanks," Spencer said.

THE DARK ROOM

By THEODORE STURGEON

Hate to bring this up, old man, but has your wife been cheating on you? Now, hold on! We're not saying she has, you understand. But there are *some nasty rumors making the rounds that involve a lot of people — many of them members of famous families. So, if the little woman is showing signs of hitting the primrose path, if she's using language fit to burn the ears off a mule skinner, it may not be her fault. Maybe she's been hanging around The Dark Room!*

THE world ended at that damn party of Beck's.

At least if it had fallen into the sun, or if it had collided with a comet, it would have been all right with me. I mean, I'd have been able to look at that fellow in the barber chair, and that girl on the TV screen, and somebody fresh from Tasmania, and I'd have been able to say, "Ain't it hell, neighbor?" and he would've looked at me with sick eyes, feeling what I felt about it.

But this was much worse.

Illustrator: Emsh

Where you sit and look around, that's the center of the whole universe. Everything you see from there circles around you, and you're the center. Other people share a lot of it, but they're circling around out there too. The only one who comes right in and sits with you, looking out from the same place, is the one you love. That's your world. And then one night you're at a party and the one you love disappears with a smooth-talking mudhead; you look around and they're gone, and you worry and keep up the bright talk; they come back and the mudhead calls you "old man" and is too briskly polite to you, and she — she won't look you in the eye. So the center of the universe is suddenly one great big aching nothing, nothing at all — it's the end of your world. The whole universe gets a little shaky then, with nothing at its center.

Of course, I told myself, this is all a crazy suspicion, and you, Tom Conway, ought to hang your head and apologize. This sort of thing happens to people, but not to us. Women do this to their husbands, but Opie doesn't do this to me — does she, *does she?*

We got out of there as soon as I could manage it without actually pushing Opie out like a wheelbarrow. We left party noises behind us, and I remember one deep guttural laugh especially that I took extremely personally, though I knew better. It was black dark outside, and we had to feel the margins of the path through our soles before our eyes got accustomed to the night. Neither of us said anything. I could almost sense the boiling, bottled-up surging agony in Opie, and I knew she felt it in me, because we always felt things in each other that way.

Then we were through the arched gateway in the hedge and there was concrete sidewalk under us instead of gravel. We turned north toward where the car was parked and I glanced quickly at her. All I could see was the turn of her throat, curved a bit more abruptly than usual because of the stiff, controlled way she was holding her head.

I said to myself, something's happened here and it's bad. Well, I'll have to ask her. I know, I thought, with a wild surge of hope, I'll ask her what happened; I'll ask her if it was the worst possible thing, and she'll say no, and then I'll ask her if it's the next worse, and so-on, until when I get to it I'll be able to say things aren't so bad after all.

So I said, "You and that guy, did you —" and all the rest of it, in words of one syllable. The thing I'm grateful to her about is that she didn't let one full second of silence go by before she answered me.

She said, "Yes."

And that was the end of the world.

The end of the world is too big a thing to describe in detail. It's too big a thing to remember clearly. The next thing that happened, as far as I can recall, is that there was gravel under my feet again and party noises ahead of me, and Opie sprinting past me and butting me in the chest to make me stop. "Where are you going?" she gasped.

I pushed her but she bounced right back against me. "Get out of the way," I said, and the sound of my voice surprised me.

"Where are you going?" she said again.

"Back there," I said. "I'm going to kill him."

"Why?"

I didn't answer that because there wasn't room inside me for such a question, but she said, "He didn't do it by himself, Tom. I was . . . I probably did more than he did. Kill me."

I looked down at the faint moon-glimmer that told where her face was. I whispered, because my voice wouldn't do anything else, "I don't want to kill you, Opie."

She said, with an infinite weariness, "There's less reason to kill him. Come on. Let's go—" I thought she was going to say "home," and winced, but she realized as much as I did that the word didn't mean anything anymore. "Let's go," she said.

When the world ends it doesn't do it once and finish with the business. It rises up and happens again, sometimes two or three times in a minute, sometimes months apart but for days at a time. It did it to me again then, because the next thing I can remember is driving the car. Next to me where Opie used to sit was just a stretch of seat-cushion. Where there used to be a stretch of seat-cushion, over next to the right-hand door, Opie sat.

Back there in the path Opie had asked me a one-word question, and in me there was no room for it. Now, suddenly, there was no room in me for anything else. The word burst out of me, pressed out by itself.

"*Why?*"

Opie sat silently. I waited until I couldn't stand it any longer and then looked over at her. A streetlight fled past and the pale gold wash of it raced across her face. She seemed utterly composed, but her eyes were too wide, and I sensed that she'd held them that way long enough for the eyeballs to dry and hurt her. "I asked you why," I snarled.

"I heard you," she said gently. "I'm just trying to think."

"You don't know why?"

She shook her head.

I looked straight through the windshield again and wrenched

the wheel. I'd damned near climbed a bank. I was going too fast, too. I knew she'd seen it coming, and she hadn't moved a muscle to stop it. I honestly don't think she cared just then.

I got the car squared away and slowed down a little. "You've got to know why. A person doesn't just — just go ahead and — and do something without a reason."

"I did," she said in that too-tired voice.

I'd already said that people don't just do things that way, so there was no point in going over it again. Which left me nothing further to say. Since she offered nothing more, we left it like that.

A couple of days later Hank blew into my office. He shut the door, which people don't usually do, and came over and half-sat on the desk, swinging one long leg. "What happened?" he said.

Hank is my boss, a fine guy, and Opie's brother.

"What happened to who?" I asked him. I was as casual as a guy can be who is rudely being forced to think about something he's trying to wall up.

He wagged his big head. "No games, Tom. What happened?"

I quit pretending. "So that's where she is. Home to mother, huh?"

"Have you been really interested in where she is?"

"Cut it out, Hank. This 'have you hurt my little sister, you swine' routine isn't like you."

He had big amber eyes like Opie's, and it was just as hard to tell what flexed and curled behind them. Finally he said, "You know better than that. You and Opie are grownups and usually behave like grownups."

"We're not now?"

"I don't know. Tom, I'm not trying to protect Opie. Not from you. I know you both too well."

"So what *are* you trying to do?"

"I just want to know what happened."

"Why?" I rapped. There it was again: why, why, why.

He scratched his head. "Not to get sloppy about it, I want to know because I think that you and Opie are the two finest bipeds that ever got together to make a fine combo. See, I have one of these logical minds. A fact plus a fact plus a force gives a result. If you know all the facts you can figure the result. I've been thinking for a lot of years that I know all the facts about both of you, all the facts that matter. And this — this just doesn't figure. Tom, what happened?"

He was beginning to annoy me. "Ask Opie," I spat. It sounded ugly. Why not? It was ugly.

Hank swung the foot and looked at me. I suddenly realized that this guy was miserable. "I did

ask her," he said in a choked voice.

I waited.

"She told me."

That rocked me. "She told you what?"

"What happened. Saturday night, at Beck's party."

"She told you?" I couldn't get over that. "What in time made her tell you?"

"I made her. She held out for a long while and then let me have it, in words of one syllable. I guess it was to shut me up."

I put my head in my hands. It made a difference to have someone else in on it. I didn't know whether I cared for the difference or not.

I jumped up then and yelled at him. "So you know what happened and you come bleating in here what happened, what happened! Why ask me, if you know?"

"You got me wrong, Tom," he said. His voice was so soft against my yelling that it stopped me like a cut throat. "Yeah, I know what she did. What I want to know is what happened to make her do it."

I didn't say anything.

"Have you talked to anyone about it?" he wanted to know.

I shook my head.

He spread his hands. "Talk to me about it."

When I didn't move, he leaned closer. "What do you say, Tom?"

"I say," I breathed, "that I got work to do. We have a magazine to get out. This is company time, remember?"

He got up off the desk right away. Did you ever listen to someone walk away from you when you weren't looking at him, and know by his footsteps that he was hurt and angry?

He opened the door and hesitated. "Tom . . ."

"What?"

"If you've got nothing to do this evening . . . call me. I'll come over."

I glared at him. "Fat chance."

He didn't say anything else. Just went away. I sat there staring at the open door. Here was a guy bragging how much he knew about me. Thinking I'd want to call him, talk to him.

Fat chance.

I didn't call him, either. Not until after eight o'clock. His phone didn't get through the first ring. He must have been sitting with his hand on it. "Hank?" I said.

He said, "I'll be right over," and hung up.

I had drinks ready when he got there. He came in saying, the stupid way people do, "How are you?"

"I'm dead," I said. I was, too. No sleep for two nights; dead tired. No Opie in the house. Dead. Dead inside.

He sat down and had sense enough to say nothing. When I

could think of something to say, it was, "Hank, I'm not going to say anything about Opie that sounds lousy. But I have to check, I have to be sure. Just what did she tell you?"

He sighed and said what Opie had done. What she had done to me, to a marriage. She'd told him, all right. He said it and, "Better drink your drink, Tom."

I drank it. I needed to. Then I looked at him. "Now that's on the record, what do you do about it?"

Hank didn't say anything. I covered my face and rocked back and forth. "I guess this happens to lots of guys, their wives making it with someone else. Sometimes it breaks them up, sometimes it doesn't. How do they live when it doesn't?"

Hank just fiddled with a table lighter. I picked up my empty glass and looked at it and all of a sudden the stem broke in two. Red blood began welling out. Hank yelped and came to me with his handkerchief. He tied it around my wrist and pulled it so tight it hurt. "Why is it so important that Opie and I get back together, Hank? To you, I mean?"

He gave me a strange look and went into the bathroom. I heard him rummaging around in the medicine chest. "There's more in it than you and Opie, Tom," he called out. He came back in with bandages. "I guess you're so full of this that it's around you every way you look, but there are other things going on in the world, honest."

"I guess there are, but they don't seem to matter."

"Hold still," he said. "This'll hurt." He stuck the iodine on my cut. It hurt like hell and I wished all hurts were as easy to take. He said, "Something awful funny is going on at Beck's."

"What happened to me is funny?" I said.

"Shut up. You know what I mean." He finished the bandage and went to the bar. "Well, maybe you don't. Look, how long have you known Beck?"

"Years."

"How well?"

"As well as you can know a guy you went to school with, roomed with, lent money to and had lunch with four times a week for eight-nine years."

"Ever notice anything odd about him?"

"No. Not Beck. The original predictable boy. Right-wing Republican, solid-color tie, independent income, thinks "Rustle of Spring" is opera, drinks vermouth-and-soda in hot weather and never touches a martini until 4 P.M. Likes to have people around, all kinds of people. The wackier the better. But he never did, said, or thought a wacky thing in his life."

"Never? You did say never?"

"Never. Except —"

"Except?"

I looked at the bandage he had made. Very neat. "That rumpus room of his. What got into him to fix it up that way I'll never know. I almost dropped dead when I saw it."

"Why?"

"Have you been there?"

He nodded. Something uncoiled back of his eyes, and it reminded me so much of Opie that I grunted the way a man does when he walks into a wagon-tongue in the dark. I took a good pull at the glass he'd brought and hung on to the subject, hard. "So you've been there. Does that look like the setup of a man who's surrounded himself all his life with nothing more modern than Dutch Queen Anne?"

He didn't say anything.

"I tell you I *know*. I think Beck would ride around in a Victorian brougham if it wouldn't make him conspicuous. He hates to be conspicuous as much as he hates modern furniture."

"A room can't get more 'modern' than that one," said Hank.

"Foam rubber and chromium," I said reminiscently. "A fireplace of black marble and high-gloss black Formica on the table-tops. Wall-to-wall broadlooms and free-form scatter-rugs. Fluorescents, all in coves, yet. The bookcase looks like a bar and the bar looks like a legitimate flight of steps."

"Maybe he's a masochist, making himself unhappy in a house furnished the way he hates it."

"He's no masochist, unless you figure the painful company of some of the weirdies he invites to his parties. And he doesn't live in a *house* furnished in Science Fiction Modern. He lives in a house with alternate Chinese Chippendale and that Dutch Queen Anne I was talking about. Only that room, that one rumpus room, is modern; and what he did it for I'll never know. It must have cost him a young fortune."

"It cost him what you might call a middle-aged fortune," Hank said bluntly. "I got the figures."

I snapped out of the mild reminiscences. "Have you now! Hank, what's the burning interest in Beck and his decor?"

Hank got up, stretched, sat down again and leaned forward with such earnestness and urgency that I drew back. "Tom," he said, "What happened to you . . . I mean, about Opie . . . suppose I could prove that it wasn't her fault at all?"

I thought about it. Finally, between my teeth, I said, "If you could really prove that, I know one mudhead that would get thoroughly killed."

"There'll be none of that talk," he rapped. I squinted up at him and decided not to protest. He

really meant it. He went on, "You have *got* to understand exactly what I mean." He paused to chew words before he let them out, then said, "I don't want you to get up any wild hopes. I'm not going to be able to prove Opie didn't . . . didn't do what she said she did Saturday night. She did it, and that's that. Shut up, now, Tom — don't say it! Not to me. She's my sister; do you think I'm enjoying this?" When I simmered down a bit, Hank said, "All I think I can prove is that what happened was completely beyond her control, and that she's completely innocent in terms of intention, even if she is guilty in rms of action."

"I'd like that," I said, with all my heart. "I'd like that just fine. Only it's hardly the kind of thing you can really prove." I double-took it. "What are you talking about?" I demanded angrily. "You mean she was hypnotized?"

"I do not," he said positively. "No amount of hypnotism would make her do something she didn't want to do, and I'm working on the premise that she didn't want to."

"Dope, then?"

"I don't think so. Did she look doped to you?"

"No." I thought back carefully. "Besides, I never heard of a drug that could do that to a woman that quickly and leave no after-effects."

"There is none, and if there were it wasn't used on her."

"Cut out the guessing games then, and tell me what it was!"

He looked at me and his face changed. "Sorry," he said softly. "I can't. I don't know. But I mean to find out."

"You better say more," I said, dazed. "You lost me back there some place."

"You know where Klaus was picked up?"

I started. "The atom spy? No. What's that got to do with it?"

"Maybe a lot," said Hank. "Just a hunch I've got. Anyway, they got him at one of Beck's parties."

"I'll be damned," I breathed.

"I didn't know that."

"Most people don't. It was one-two-three-hush. There was a Central Intelligence agent there and Klaus walked over to him and spilled the whole thing. The agent got him out of there and arrested him, then checked his story. It checked all right. Do you know *Cry for Clara?*"

"Do I know it? I wish I'd never heard it. Seventeen weeks on the 'Hit Parade,' and squalling out of every radio and every record store and juke-box in creation. Do I know it?"

"Know who wrote it?"

"No."

"Guy called Willy Simms. Never wrote a song before, never wrote one since."

"So?"

"He did the first draft at one of Beck's parties."

"I don't see what that has to do with —"

He interrupted me. "The hen fight that put two nice deep fingernail gouges across Marie Munro's million-dollar face happened at Beck's. A school-teacher did it — an otherwise harmless old biddy who'd never even seen a Munro picture and hadn't even spoken to The Face that evening. The man who —"

"Wait a minute, wait a min —" I started, but he wouldn't wait.

"The man who killed that preacher on Webb Street two weeks ago — remember? — did it with Beck's poker, which he threw out of Beck's rumpus room window like a damn javelin. That hilarious story — I heard you telling it yourself — about the pansy breeder at the Flower Show . . ."

"Don't tell me that one came from Beck's." I grinned in spite of myself.

"It did. Because of someone's remark that nobody knows where dirty stories originate. And *bing*, that one was originated on the spot." He paused. "By Lila Falsehaven."

"Lila? You mean the white-haired old granny who writes children's books?" I drank on that. That was too fine. "Hank, what are you getting at with all this?"

Hank pulled on an earlobe. "All these things I mentioned — all different, all happening to different kinds of people. I think there's a lowest common denominator."

"You've already told me that; they all happened at Beck's parties."

"The thing I'm talking about *makes* things happen at Beck's parties."

"Aw, for Pete's sake. Coincidence . . ."

"Coincidence hell!" he rumbled. "Can't you understand that I've known about this thing for a long time now? I'm not telling you all these things occurred to me just since Opie . . . uh . . . since last Saturday night. I'm telling you that what Opie did is another one of those things."

I grunted thoughtfully. "Lowest common denominator. . . . Heck, the main thing all those people have in common is that they have nothing in common."

"That's right," Hank nodded. "That seems to be Beck's rule-of-thumb: always mix them up. A rich one, a talented one, a weird one, a dull one."

"Makes for a good party," I said stupidly.

He had the good sense not to pick that one up. Good party. Swell party. Opie . . . No, I wouldn't think about it. I said, "What's this all about, anyway? Why worry so much about Beck? It's his business who he invites. Strange things happen — sure, they'd happen at your house if you filled it up with characters."

"Here's what it's about. I want you to go back there and find out what that lowest common denominator is."

"Why?"

"For the magazine, maybe. It depends. Anyhow, kid, that's an assignment."

"Stick it," I said. "I'm not going back there."

"Why not?"

"That's the stupidest question yet!"

"Tom," he said gently. "Getting riled up won't help. I really want to know why you don't want to go back. Is it the place you can't stand, or the idea of seeing Opie there?"

"I don't mind the place," I said sullenly.

He was so pleased I was astonished. "Then you can go back. She will never go there again."

"You sound real positive."

"I am. Things happen to people at Beck's parties. But if they happen to you, you don't go back."

"I don't get it."

"Neither do I. But that's one of the things I want you to find out about."

"Hank, this is crazy!"

"Sure it's crazy. And you're just the man for the job."

"Why, especially?"

"Because you know Beck better than most people. Because you have something personal at stake. Because you're a good reporter. And — well, because you're so damn normal."

I didn't feel normal. I said, "If you're so interested in Beck and his shindigs, why don't you chase the story down yourself? You seem to know what to look for."

When he didn't answer, I looked up at him and saw that he had turned his back. After awhile he said, "I'm one of the ones who can't go back."

I thought that over. "You mean something happened to you?"

"Yes, something happened to me," he snarled in angry mimicry. "And that part of it you can skip."

For the first time I felt that little nubbin of intrigue that bites me when I'm near a really hot story. "So you've taken care of my Saturday nights. What am I supposed to do the rest of the week?"

"You've been around the magazine long enough not to ask me how to do your work. I just mentioned a lot of people. Go find out why they did the things they did." And all of a sudden he stalked to the door, scooped up his hat, growled a noise that was probably "Goodnight," and left.

I went to see Lila Falsehaven. It was no trouble at all to get her address from Kiddy-Joy Books, Inc. She invited me to tea when I called her up. Tea, no less. Me. Tom Conway.

She was a real greeting-card grandma. Steel-rimmed specs with the thickest part at the lower edges. Gleaming, perfect, even false teeth. A voice that reminded you of a silver plate full of warm spice cookies. And on the table between us, a silver plate full of warm spice cookies. "Cream?" she said. "Or lemon?"

"Straight," I told her. "I mean, neither, thank you. This place

looks just like the place where the Lila Falsehaven books are written."

"Thank you," she said, inclining her neat little head. She passed me tea in a convoluted bone-china cup I could have sneezed off a mantel at forty paces. "I've been told before that my books and my home and my appearance are those of the perfect grandmother. I've never had a child, you know. But I believe I've more grandchildren than anyone who ever lived." She delivered up an intricate old laugh like intricate old lace.

I tasted the tea. People should drink more tea. I put down the little cup and leaned back and smiled at her. "I like it here."

She blushed like a kid and smiled back. "And now — what can I do for you? Surely that wicked magazine of yours doesn't want a story by me. Or even about me."

"It's not a wicked magazine," I said loyally. "Just true-to-life. We call them as we see them."

"Some truths," she said gently, "are better left uncalled."

"You really believe that?"

"I really do," she said.

"But the world isn't what your grandchildren read about in your books."

"My world is," she said with conviction.

I had come here for something, and now was the time to get it. I shook my head. "Not completely. Some of your world has flower shows with pansies in them."

She didn't make a sound. She closed her eyes and I watched her smooth old skin turn to ivory and then to paper. I waited. At last her eyes opened again. She looked straight at me, lifted one hand, then the other, spread them apart and placed each on the carven chair-arms. I looked at the hands, and saw each in turn relax as if by a deep effort of will. Her eyes drew me right up out of my chair. Deep in them was a spark, as hot, as bright, and quite as clean as a welding arc. The whole sweet room held its breath.

"Mr. Conway," she said in a voice that was very faint and very distinct, "I believe in truth as I believe in innocence and in beauty, so I shall not lie to you. I understand now that you came here to find out if I was really the one who contrived that filthy anecdote. I was. But if you came to find out why I did it, or what is in me that made it possible, I cannot help you. I'm sorry. If I knew, if I only knew, perhaps I'd tell you. Now you'd better go."

"But I —"

Then I found out that the clean bright fire so deep in her eyes could repel as well as attract, and I was in the doorway with my hat in my hand. I said, "I'm

sor —" but the way she looked, the way she sat there looking at me without moving, made it impossible for me to speak or bow, or do anything but just get out. I knew I'd never be back, too, and that was a shame. She's a nice person. She lives in a nice place.

The whole thing was spoiled, and I felt lousy. Lousy.

My press card got me as far as Col. Briggs, and the memory of the time I got Briggs out of a raided stag party just after the war got me the rest of the way. If it hadn't been for those two items, I'd never have seen Klaus. The death house was damn near as hard to get into as it was to get out of.

They gave me ten minutes and left me alone with him, though there was a guard standing where he could see in. Klaus didn't look as if he'd have brought out the silver tea service even if he had one. All he did when I came in was to say the name of the magazine under his breath, and said that way it sounds pretty dirty. I sat down on the bunk beside him and he got right up off it. I didn't say anything, and after a while that bothered him. I don't suppose anyone did that to him, ever.

"Well, what is it? What do you want?" he snarled finally.

"You'd never guess," I said.

"Am I guilty? Yes. Did I know what I was doing? Yes. Is it true that I just want to see this crummy human race blown off this crummy planet as soon as possible? Yes. Am I sorry? Yes — that I got caught. Otherwise — no." He shrugged. "That's my whole story, you know it, everybody knows it. I've been scooped dry and the bottom scraped. Why can't you guys leave me alone?"

"There's still something I'd like to know, though."

"Don't you read the papers?" he asked. "Once I got nabbed I had no secrets."

"Look," I said, "this guy Stevens —" Stevens was the Central Intelligence man who had dragged him in.

"Yeah, Stevens," Klaus snorted. "Our hero. I not only put him on page one — he's on boxes of breakfast cereal. You *really* got to be a hero to get on corn flakes."

"He wasn't a hero," I said. "He didn't know you from Adam and didn't care until you spilled to him."

Klaus stopped his pacing and slowly turned toward me. "Do you believe that?"

"Why not? That's what happened."

He came and sat beside me, looking at me as if I had turned into a two-headed giraffe. "You know, I've told that to six million different people and you're the first one who ever believed it. What did you say your name

was? If you don't mind my asking."

"Conway," I said.

"I'm glad you came," he said. For him, that was really something.

He shoved back so he could lean against the wall and gave me a cigarette. "What do you want to know?"

"Why you did it."

He looked at me angrily, and I added quickly, "Not about the atom secrets. About the spill."

The angry look went away, but he didn't say anything. I pushed a bit. "You never made another mistake. Nobody in history ever operated as quietly and cleverly as you did. No one in the world suspected you, and as far as I've been able to discover no one was even about to. So you suddenly find yourself at a party with a C.I. man, walk over, and sing. Why?"

He thought about it. "It was a good party," he said, after a bit. Then, "I guess I figured the game had gone on long enough, that's all."

I snorted.

"What's that for?" he wanted to know.

"You don't really believe that."

"I don't?"

"You don't," I said positively. "That's just something you figured out after it happened. What I want to know is what went on in your head before it happened."

"You know a hell of a lot about how I think," he said sneeringly.

"Sure I do," I said, and when he was quiet, I added, "Don't I?"

"Yeah," he growled. "Yeah." He closed his eyes to think about it, and then said, "You just asked me the one thing I don't know. One second I was sitting there enjoying myself, and the next I was backing that goon-boy into the corner and telling him about my life of sin. It just seemed a good idea at the time."

The guard came then to let me out. "Thanks for coming," Klaus said.

"That's all right. You're sure you can't tell me?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Shall I come back? Maybe after you think about it for a while . . ."

He shook his head. "Wouldn't do no good," he said positively. "I know, because I haven't thought about anything else much since it happened. But I'm glad somebody believes it, anyway."

"So long. Drop me a note if you figure it out."

I don't know if he ever did. They burned him a few days later. I never got a note.

I grabbed another name from the list I'd run up. Willy Simms. Song writer.

I went into a music shop and asked the man if he had a record of *Cry for Clara.* He looked as if

he'd found root beer in a bock bottle. "Still?" he breathed with a sort of weary amazement, and went and got the record.

"Look," I told him, "I think this platter is the most awful piece of candy corn that ever rolled out of the Alley." I don't often explain myself to people, but I couldn't have even a total stranger think I liked it.

He leaned across the counter. "Did you know," he said in a much friendlier tone of voice, "that Guy Lombardo is cutting it this week?"

I shared his tired wonder for a long moment, and then got out of there.

One and three-quarter million copies sold and still moving, and yet Willy Simms still lived in a place with four flights of stairs up to it. I found the door and leaned against the frame for a while, blowing hard. When the spots went away from my eyes, I knocked. A wrinkled little man opened the door.

"Is Willy Simms here?"

He looked at me and down at the flat record envelope I held. "What's that?"

"*Cry for Clara*," I said. He took it out of my hand and asked me how much I paid for it. I told him. He held the door open with his foot, scooped up a handful of change from an otherwise empty bookshelf, and counted out the price into my hand. Then he broke the record in two on his thigh, put the pieces together and broke them again, and slung them into the fireplace at his right. "I'm Willy Simms," he said. "Come on in."

I went in and stood just inside. I didn't know what this little prune would do next. I said, "My name's Tom —"

"Drop your hat there," he said. He crossed the room.

"I just dropped in to —"

"Drink?" he asked.

Since I never say no to that, and didn't have to say yes because he was already pouring, I just waited.

He came smiling with a glass. He had good teeth. "Bourbon," he said. "A man's drink. Knew the minute I saw you you were a bourbon man."

I very much prefer rye. I said, "Once in a while —"

"Sure," he said. "Nothing like Bourbon. Sit down."

"Mr. Simms," I said.

"Willy. Nobody ever called me mister. Used to be I wasn't worth a 'mister.' Now I'm too good for it." He salvaged his modesty as he said this with a warm grin. "Maybe you think I shouldn't of busted your record."

"Well," I smiled, "I thought it a bit strange."

"I don't have a copy here and I won't let one in. Two reasons," he barked, making a V with

shiny-dry, bony fingers. "First, I don't like it. What I specially don't like is the way people try to make me sit and listen to it and tell me how good this part is and that part, and where did I ever get the idea of going from the sub-dominant into an unrelated minor. Yeah, that's what one of them wanted to know."

"I remember that part," I said. "It's —"

"Second," said Willy Simms, "every time I bust one of those records it reminds me I can afford to do it, and I like to be reminded."

"Yeah," I said. "That's —"

"Besides," he said, "any time I bust one, the party walks out of here and buys another. It ain't the royalty, you understand. It's the score I'm running up. They tell me it'll sell two and a quarter million."

"Two and a —"

"You've finished your drink," he said. He took it out of my hand and filled it again. I wished it was rye, raised it to him and then sipped. "Willy," I began.

"I never wrote a song before," Willy said.

"Yes," I answered. "So I —"

"And I'm going to tell you something I ain't told nobody else. I'm going to tell it to you, and from now on, I just decided, I'm going to tell everybody."

He leaned toward me excitedly. I realized that he was boiled. I knew instinctively that it hadn't made any difference in him; he was probably this way cold sober too. He was obviously waiting for me to say something, but by this time I didn't want to spoil anything.

"So I'll tell you first, and it's this: I'm never going to write another song, either."

"But you've just begun to —"

"There's a good reason for it," he said. "Since you ask me, I'll tell you. I ain't going to write another song because I can't. It ain't that I don't read or write music. They say Leadbelly couldn't read music either. And it ain't that I don't want to. I want to, all right. But did you ever hear the old saying lightning never strikes twice in the same place?"

That I could match. "Sure, and they say it's always darkest before the dawn, too, but that doesn't —"

"The real reason," said Willy Simms, "is this." He paused dramatically. "I'm tone deaf. I couldn't carry a chord in a keyster. Do you see a piano here, or even a harmonica?"

"Listen," I said, "no one who was tone deaf could have —"

"Lightning," he said gravely. "It struck, that's all. Way down inside me was one little crumb called *Cry for Clara*, and the lightning struck and drove it out. But there was just the one little crumb

there, and now there is no more."

"Shucks," I said. "Maybe —"

"And I could be wrong even about that," he said morosely. "I don't really believe even the little crumb was there. What I actually did, I did something that just can't be done, not by me, anyway. Like a lobster writing a book. Like a phonograph playing a pizza pie. Like us not having another drink."

He demonstrated the impossibility of his last remark. I said, "There are certain things a man can do and certain things —"

"Like a trip back to one of Beck's parties," he said. "Some things just can't happen." He glowered at me suddenly. "You don't happen to be a friend of this Beck? This is the guy made me hate myself."

"Me? Why, I —"

"If you were, I'd throw you right down those stairs out there, big as you are." He half rose, and for a split second I was genuinely alarmed. He was one of those people who, in speaking of anger, acts it out, pulsing temples, narrowed eyes and all. But he sank back and recovered his disarming smile. "I been doing all the talking. What was it you came to see me about?"

I opened my mouth, and hesitated. To my amazement, he waited. "I just dropped up to sort of . . ." I paused. He nodded encouragingly. "To find out about —" I began, then stopped.

"I see everybody," he confided. "Some people, now, they pick and choose who comes in. Not me. I — where are you going?"

I was at the door with my hat, which I'd picked up on the way. "Thanks for the dr —"

"Well, don't rush off."

I searched valiantly for the one word which might serve me, and found it. "Goodbye," I said, and whipped through the door. I could hear Willy Simms' muffled voice through the panel: "All right, I'll finish your drink if you're in such a damn hurry."

All the way down the stairs I could hear him, though I could no longer distinguish his words. Once he laughed. I got to the sidewalk and turned left. There was a man standing by a tree a few yards down the street, curbing a dog. "Hey," I said.

He turned toward me, raising his eyebrows. "Who — me?"

I tapped his shoulder with my left index finger. "New York would have the largest telephone book in the world," I said, "if they didn't have to break it into five sections."

He said, "Huh?"

"Don't mind me," I told him. "I just wanted to see if I could say a whole sentence all the way through." I tipped my hat and walked on. At the corner I looked back. He was still standing there,

staring at me. When he saw me turn he called, "Whaddaya — wise?" I just waved at him and went home.

"Beck," I said into the phone, "I want to see you."

"Sure," he said. "You're coming over Saturday, aren't you?"

"Uh . . . yes. But I want to see you before that."

"It'll wait," he said easily.

"No, it won't," I said, and there must have been something special in my voice, because he asked me if anything was the matter.

"I don't know, Beck," I said honestly. "I mean, something is, but I don't know what." I had an idea suddenly. "Beck, can I bring someone to the party?"

"You know you can, Tom. Anyone you like."

"My brother-in-law Hank."

There was a long silence at the other end. Then, in a slightly strained voice, Beck said, "Why him?"

"Why not?"

The silence again. Then, as if he had had a brainwave, Beck said easily, "No reason. If he wants to come, bring him."

"Thanks. Now, about seeing you before. How about tonight?"

"Tom, I'd love to, but I'm tied up. It'll wait till Saturday, won't it?"

"No," I said. "Tomorrow?"

"I'm out of town tomorrow. I'm really very sorry, Tom."

Abruptly, I said, "It's about the lowest common denominator."

"What?"

"Your parties," I said patiently. "The people who go to them."

He laughed suddenly. "The one thing they have in common is that they have nothing in common."

"That I know," I said. "I meant the people who used to go to your parties and don't any more."

The silence, but much shorter this time. "I'm looking at my book," he said. "Maybe I could squeeze in a few minutes with you tomorrow."

"What time?" I said, keeping the humorless grin out of my voice.

"Two o'clock. Kelly's all right?"

"At the bar. I'll be there, Beck, and thanks."

I hung up and scratched my chin. Lowest common denominator?

Hank's phrase, that was. Hank. The guy who'd put me on to this weird business. The guy who'd told me that if things happened to you at Beck's parties, you didn't go back. The guy who said *he* was never going back.

And wouldn't say why.

Well, if I had anything to do with it he'd go back.

Opie, Lila Falsehaven, Klaus,

Willy Simms, Hank. Each had done something they shouldn't — maybe *couldn't* was the word — have done. Each would not — could not? — go back. Sometimes the thing was just silly, like Lila Falsehaven's dirty story. Sometimes it was deadly, like Klaus's crazy break.

Well, I told myself, keep plugging at it. Get enough case histories and a basic law will show itself. Avogadro worked up a fine theory about the behavior of gas molecules because he had enough molecules to work with. Sociologists struggle toward theories without enough numbers to work with and they make some sort of progress. If I worked hard enough and lived long enough, maybe I could pile up a couple hundred million case histories of people who didn't go to Beck's parties any more, and come out with an answer.

Meanwhile, I'd better talk to Hank.

This time I went to his office and closed the door. He picked up the phone and said, "Sue, don't ring this thing until I tell you . . . I know, I *know*. I don't care. Tell him to wait." Then he just lounged back and looked up at me.

"Hank," I said, "about this assignment. How much are you willing to help me?"

"All the way."

"Okay," I said. "Saturday night you have a date."

"I have? Where?"

"Beck's."

He sat upright, his eyes still on my face. "No."

"That's what you mean by 'all the way'?" I asked quietly.

"I said I'd help you. Me going there — that wouldn't help anything. Besides, Beck wouldn't hold still for it."

"Beck told me to bring you."

"The hell he did!"

"Look, Hank, when I tell you —"

"Okay, okay, cool down, will you? I'm not calling you a liar." He pulled at his lip. "Tell me exactly what you said about it and what he said. As near as you can remember it."

I thought back. "I asked him if I could bring someone and he said sure. Then I mentioned your name and he — well, sort of hesitated. So I wanted to know why not, and he came off it right away. Said 'If he wants to come, bring him.'"

"The foxy little louse!" Hank said from between clenched teeth.

"What's the matter?"

Hank got up, smacked his fist into his palm. "He meant exactly what he said, Tom. Bring me — *if* I want to come. Conversely, if I don't want to come, don't bring me. I don't want to, Tom."

"Not even in the process of 'going all the way' to help me?"

I asked sarcastically.

He said tightly, "That's right." I must have looked pretty grim, because he tried to explain. "If I could be sure it would break the case, Tom, I'd do it no matter what. If you can convince me that that one single act on my part is all you need, why, I'm your boy. Can you do that?"

"No," I said in all honesty. "It might help like crazy, though. All right," I conceded reluctantly. "If you don't want to go, you won't, and that's that. Now — short of that, will you help?"

"Absolutely," he said relievedly.

Then I aimed a forefinger at him and barked, "Okay. Then you'll tell me what happened to you there, and why you won't go back. You'll tell me now, and you won't even try to wriggle out of it."

It got real quiet in the office then. Hank's eyes half-closed, and I had seen that sleepy look before. Every time I had somebody had gotten himself rather badly hurt.

"I should have known better," he said after a while, "than to put a real reporter on something that concerned me. You really want that information?"

I nodded.

"Tom," he said, and his voice was almost a lazy yawn, "I'm going to punch you right in the middle of your big fat mouth."

"For asking you a businesslike question that you made my business?"

"Not exactly," Hank said. "I'm going to tell you, and you're going to laugh, and when you laugh I'm going to let you have it."

"I haven't laughed at any of this yet," I said.

"And you still want to know."

I just waited.

"All right," he said. He came around his desk, balled up his fist, and eyed my face carefully. "I went to one of Beck's parties, and right in the middle of the proceedings I wet my pants."

I bit down hard on the insides of my cheeks, but I couldn't hold it. I let out one joyful whoop and then I caromed off the water cooler, slid eight feet on the side of my head, and brought up against the wall. A great cloud of luminous fog rolled in and swirled, then gradually began to clear. I sat up. There was blood on my mouth and chin. Hank was standing over me, looking very sad. He dropped a clean handkerchief where I could reach it. I used it, then got my feet under me.

"Damn it, Tom, I'm sorry," he said. The way he said it I believed him. "But you shouldn't've laughed. I told you you shouldn't."

I went to the deskside chair and sat down. Hank drew me some water and brought it over. "Dip the handkerchief," he ordered. "Tom, this'll make more sense to

you when you have a chance to think it over. Why don't you cut out?"

"I don't have to, I guess," I said with difficulty. "I guess if a thing like that happened to . . ."

"If it happened," Hank said soberly, "it wouldn't be funny, and God helped the man who laughed at it. It would shake your confidence like nothing else could. You'd think of it suddenly in a bus, at a board-meeting, in the composing room. You'd think of it when you were tramping up and down the office dictating. You'd remember that when it happened it came without warning and there was nothing you could do about it until it was over. It would be the kind of thing that just couldn't happen — and forever after you'd be afraid of it happening again."

"And the last place in the world you'd go back to is the place where it happened."

"I'd go through hell first," he said, his voice thick, like taking a vow. "And . . . just to cap it, that damned Beck —"

"He laughed?"

"He did not," said Hank viciously. "All he did was meet me at the door when I was escaping, and tell me I'd do just as well not to come again. He was polite enough, I guess, but he meant it."

I dunked the handkerchief again and leaned over the glass desktop, where I could see my reflection. I mopped at my chin. "This Beck," I said. "He certainly makes sure. Hank, all the other people who used to go to Beck's and don't any more . . . do you suppose Beck told them all not to come back?"

"I never thought of it. Probably so. Except maybe Klaus. He wasn't going anywhere after what he did."

"I saw Willy Simms," I told him. "He acted mad at Beck, and said something about going there again being as impossible as writing another song. He's tone deaf, you know."

"I didn't know. What about Miss Falsehaven? Did you see her?"

"She wouldn't be seen dead in the place. She's half crazy with the memory of what she did. To you or me, that would be nothing. To her it was the end of the world."

The end of the world. The end of the world. "Hank, I'm just dimly beginning to understand what you meant about . . . Opie. That what she did wasn't her doing." Suddenly, shockingly — I believe I was more startled than Hank — I bellowed, "But it was in her to do it! There had to be that one grain of — of whatever it took!"

"Maybe, maybe . . ." he said gently. "I'd like to think not, though. I'd like to think there is something there at Beck's that

puts the bee in people's bonnets. An alien bee, one that couldn't under any other circumstances exist with that person." He blushed. "I'd feel better if I could prove that."

"I got to get out of here. I'm meeting Beck," I said, after a glance at his desk clock.

"Are you now?" He went back to his chair. "Give him my regards."

I started out. "Tom —"

"Well?"

"I'm sorry I had to hit you. I had to. See?"

"Sure I see," I said, and when I grinned it hurt. "If I didn't see, they'd be mixing a cast for your busted back by now." I went out.

Beck was waiting for me when I rushed into Kelly's. I picked up his drink and started back to the corner.

"Not a table," he bleated, following me. "I have a train to catch, Tom. I told you that."

"Come on," I said. "This won't take but a minute." He came, grumbling, and he let me maneuver him into the upholstered corner of a booth. I sat down where he'd have to climb over me if the conversation should make him too impulsive.

"Sorry I'm late, Beck. But I'm glad you're in a hurry. I won't have to beat about the bush."

"What's on your mind?" he said, irritatingly looking at his watch and, for a moment, closing his eyes as he calculated the minutes.

"Where's your money come from?" I asked bluntly.

"Why, it — well, really, Tom. You've never — I mean —" He shifted gears and began to get stuffy. "I'm not used to being catechized about my personal affairs, old man. We are old friends, yes, but after all —"

"Shove it," I said. "I'm the boy who knew you when, remember? We roomed together in college, and unless my memory fails me it was State College, as near to being a public school as you can find these days. We had three neckties and one good blanket between us for more than two years, and skipped forty-cent lunches for date money. That wasn't so long ago, Beck. You graduated into pushing a pen for an insurance company — right? And when you left it you never took another job. But here you are with a big ugly house full of big ugly furniture, a rumpus room by Hilton out of Tropics, and a passion for throwing big noisy parties every week."

"May I ask," he said between his protruding front teeth, "why you are so suddenly interested?"

"You look more than ever like a gopher," I said detachedly, figuring it wouldn't hurt to make him mad. He always blurts things

when he's mad enough. "Now, Beck — working around a magazine like ours, we get a lot of advance stuff about things that are about to break. I'm just trying to do you a favor, son."

"I don't see —"

"How would you make out," I asked him, "if they were to drag out your income tax returns for the last four years and balance them against your real property?"

"I'd make out nicely," he said smugly. "If you must know, my income comes from investments. I've done very well indeed."

"What did you use for capital in the first place?"

"That's really none of your business, Tom," he said briskly, and I almost admired him for the way he stood up to me. "But I might remind you that you need very little capital to enter the market, and if you can buy low and sell high just a few times in a row, you don't have to worry about capital."

"You're not a speculator, Beck," I snorted, "Not *you!* Why, I never figured you had the sense to pour mud out of a helmet. Who's your tipster?"

For some reason, that hit him harder than anything else I'd said. "You're being very annoying," he said prissily, "and you're going to make me miss my train. I'll have to leave now. I don't know what's gotten into you, Tom. I don't much care for this kind of thing, and I'm sure I don't know what this is all about."

"I'll go with you," I said, "and explain."

"You needn't bother," he snapped. He got up, and so did I. I let him out from behind the table and followed him to the door. The hat check girl rummaged around and found a pigskin suitcase for him. I took it from her before he could get a hand on it. "Give me that!" he yelled.

"Don't stand here and argue," I said urgently. "You'll be late." I barreled on out to the curb and whistled. I whistle pretty well. Cabs stopped three blocks in every direction. I shoved him into the nearest one and climbed in after him. "You know you could never catch a cab like I can," I said. "I just want to help."

"Central Depot," Beck said to the driver. "Tom, what are you after? I've never seen you like this."

"Just trying to help," I said again. "A lot of people starting to talk about you, Beck."

He paled. "Really?"

"Oh, yes. What do you expect: hidden income, big parties that anyone can come to, and all?"

"Lots of people have parties."

"Nobody talks about them afterward the way they do about yours."

"What are they saying, Tom?"

He hated to be conspicuous.

"Why did you tell Willy Simms never to show his face at your house again?" It was a shot in the dark, but the bell rang.

"I think I was quite reasonable with him," Beck protested. "He talks all the time, and he bored me. He bored everybody, every time he came."

"He still talks all the time," I said mysteriously, and dropped that part of it. Beck began to squirm. "Personally, I think you get something from the people who come to those brawls. And once you've gotten it, you drop them."

Beck leaned forward to speak to the driver, but for some reason his voice wouldn't work. He coughed and tried again. "Faster, driver."

"So what I want to know is, what do you get from those people, and how do you get it?"

"I don't know what you mean, and I don't see how any of this concerns you."

"Something happened to my wife last Saturday."

"Oh," he said. "Oh, dear." Then, "Well, what do you suppose I got from her?"

I put my hands behind me, lifted up, and sat on them. "I know you awful well," I grated, "which fact just saved your life. You don't mean what you just said, old man, do you?"

He went quite white. "Oh, good heavens, Tom, no! No! It was what you said before — that I got something out of every one of these people. I'm more sorry than I can say about — about Opie — I couldn't help it, you know, I was busy, there was a lot to do, there always is. . . . No, Tom, I didn't mean that the way you thought."

He didn't, either. Not Beck. There were some things that were just not in Beck's department. I took a deep, head-clearing breath and asked, "Why did you tell Hank not to come back?"

"I'd rather not say exactly," he said, pleading and sincere. "It was for his own benefit, though. He . . . er . . . made rather a fool of himself, and I thought it would be a kindness if he could be angry at me instead of at himself."

I gave him a long careful look. He had never been very smart, but he had always been as glib as floorwax. The cab turned into the station ramp just then, so I came up with the big question. "Beck, does everybody who goes to your parties sooner or later make a fool of himself?"

"Oh dear no," he said, and I think if he had not been looking at his watch and worrying, he would never have said what came out. "Some people are immune."

The cab stopped and he got out. "I'll take it," I said when his

hand went for his pocket. "You better run." I hung my head out the window, watching him, waiting, wondering if it would come, even after all this. And it came.

From fifty feet away he called over his shoulder, "See you Saturday, Tom!"

"Kelly's," I told the cabbie, and settled back.

So. I couldn't make Beck so mad he'd exclude me from one of his parties — and somehow or other the rich and dumb and smart and stupid and ugly and big and famous and nowhere people who came there became prone to making fools of themselves — and Beck got something out of it when they did — and what did he want out of me? And what did he mean by "some people are immune"? Immune . . . That was a peculiar word to use. Immune. There was something in that house — in that room — that made people do things that — Wait a minute. Hank and Miss Falsehaven and, if you wanted to be broad about it, Opie — they had indeed made fools of themselves. But the guy who killed the preacher with Beck's poker — and Klaus the spy — that wasn't what you'd call foolishness. And then Willy Simms. Is the creation of a hit song foolishness?

Lowest common denominator . . .

I paid off the cab and went in to Kelly's to double the drink I'd missed because Beck had been in such a hurry. I was drinking the second one when some simple facts fell into place.

The next best thing to knowing what the answer is is to know *where* it is.

Beck was on his way out of town.

There was only one single thing that connected all these crazy facts: Beck's rumpus room.

A good thing I have credit at Kelly's. I flew out of there so fast I forgot to leave anything on the bar. Except a half shot of rye.

It wasn't quite dark when I reached Beck's, but that didn't matter. The house was set well back in its mid-city three acres. High board fences guarded the sides, and a thick English privet hid it from the street. Once I'd slipped through the gate and onto the lawn, I might as well have been underground. The house was one of those turn-of-the-century horrors, not quite chalet, not quite manse, with a little more gingerbread than the moderns like and a little less than the Victorians drooled about. It had gables and turrets and rooms scattered on slightly different levels, so that the windows looked like the holes on an IBM card.

I hefted the package I'd picked up at the hardware store on the way and, sticking close to the north hedge, worked my way

cautiously around to the back.

One glance told me I couldn't do business there. The house was built at the very back of its property, and behind it ran a small street or a large alley, whichever you like. The back of the house hung over it like a cliff, and there was traffic and neighbors across the way. No, it would have to be a side. I cursed, because I knew the rumpus room faced the back with its huge picture windows of one-way glass; then I remembered that the room was air-conditioned; the windows wouldn't open and couldn't be cut because they were certainly double-pane jobs.

I tried two ground-floor windows, but they were locked. Another was open, but barred. Then nothing but a bare, windowless stretch. On a hunch I approached it, through the flower bed at its base. And sure enough, just at chest-height, hidden behind a phalanx of hollyhocks, was a small window.

I got out the penlite flash I'd just bought and peered in. The window was locked with one of those burglar-proof cast-steel locks that screws a rubber ferrule up against the frame. I was pleased. I got out the can of aquarium cement and worked the stuff into a cone, which I placed against the glass. Then I got out the glass cutter and scribed around the cone. I rapped the cut circle once, and with a snap it broke out, with the cone of putty holding it. I reached down and laid putty and glass on the window-sill, unscrewed the burglarproof lock, opened the window and climbed in. With my putty-knife I carefully removed the broken pane, and cracked it and the circle into small enough pieces to wrap up in the brown paper from the parcel I carried. I measured the frame and cut the one spare piece of window glass I'd brought along, and installed it using the aquarium cement. The stuff's black and doesn't glare at you the way clean, new putty does. I cleaned the new pane inside and out, shut and locked the window, and carefully swept the sill and the floor under it. I dumped the sweepings into my jacket pocket and stowed the tools here and there in my jacket and pants. So now nobody ever had to know I'd been here.

I was in a large storage closet which turned out to belong to the butler's pantry. That led to the kitchen, and that to the dining room, and now I knew where I was. I went into the front hall and down toward the back of the house. The door to the rumpus-room was closed. On this side it was all crudded up with carven wainscoting; golden oak and Ionic columns. It was a sliding door; I rolled it back and on the other side it was a flat slab of birch to match the shocking modern of the

rumpus room. Again I had that strange feeling of wonderment about Beck and his single peculiarity.

I shut the door and crossed the dim room to the picture windows. There I touched the button that closed the heavy drapes. There was a faint hum and they began to move. As they did, all but sourceless light began to grow in the room, until when they met the room was filled with a pervasive golden glow.

And standing in the middle of the rug which I had just crossed, standing yards away from any door and a long way from any furniture, was a girl.

The shock of it was almost physical. And for a split second I thought my eyes registered a dazzle, like the subjective afterglow of a lightning flash. Then I got hold of myself and met her long, level, green-eyed gaze.

If a woman can be strong and elfin at once, she was. Her hair was blue-black with a strange reddish light in it. Her skin was too flawless, like something in a wax museum, but for all that it was real and warm-looking. She was smiling, and I could see how her teeth met edge to edge in that rarity, the perfect bite. Her low-cut dress was of a heavy gold and purple brocade, and she must have had a dozen petticoats under it. Sixteenth century — seventeenth century? In *this* room?

"That was nice," she said.

"It was?" I said stupidly.

"Yes, but it didn't last. I suppose you're immune."

"Depends," I said, looking at the neckline of her dress. Then I remembered Beck's strange remark.

She said, "You're not supposed to be here. Not all alone."

"I could say the same for you. But since we're both here, we're not alone."

"I'm not," she said. "But you are." And she laughed. "You're Conway."

"Oh. He told you about me, did he? Well, he never said a word about you."

"Of course not. He wouldn't dare."

"Do you live here?"

She nodded. "I've always lived here."

"What do you mean always? Beck's been here three — yes, it's four years now. And you've been here all this time?"

She nodded. "Since before that."

"I'll be damned," I said. "Good for Beck. I thought he didn't like women."

"He doesn't need to." I saw her gaze stray over my shoulder and fix on something behind me. I whirled. Clinging to the drape was a spider as big as a Stetson hat. I didn't know whether it was going to jump or what. With the same motion which began when

I turned, I snatched up a heavy ashstand made of links of chain welded together. Before I could heave it the girl was beside me, holding it with both hands. "Don't, she said. "You'll break the window and people will come. I want you to stay here for awhile."

"But the —"

"It isn't real," she said. I looked and the spider was gone. I turned back to her. "What the hell goes on here?"

She sighed. "That wasn't so good," she said. "You were supposed to be frightened. But you just got angry at it. Why weren't you frightened?"

"I am now," I said, glancing at the drapes. "I guess I get mad first and scared later. What's the idea? You put that thing there, didn't you?"

She nodded.

"What for?"

"I was hungry."

"I don't get you."

"I know."

She moved to the divan. She rustled wonderfully when she walked. She subsided into the foam rubber and patted the seat next to her. I crossed slowly. You don't have to know what a thing's all about to like it. I sat beside her.

She cast her eyes down and smoothed her skirt. It was as if she were waiting for something.

I didn't give her long to wait. I pulled her to me and clawed at the back of her dress. It slipped downward easily just as my cheek encountered the heavy stubble on hers.

The heavy —

With a shout I sprang back, goggle-eyed. There on the couch sprawled a heavy-set man with bad teeth and a four-day beard. He roared with rich baritone laughter.

You don't have to understand a situation to dislike it. I stepped forward and let loose with my Sunday punch. It travels from my lower rib to straight ahead, and by the time it gets where it's going it has all of me behind it. But this time it didn't get anywhere. My elbow crackled from the strain as my fist connected with nothing at all. But from the seat of the divan came a large black cat. It leaped to the floor and streaked across the room. I fell heavily onto the divan, bounced off, and rushed the animal. It doubled back at the end of the room, eluded my grasping fingers easily, and the next thing I knew it was climbing the drapes, hand over hand.

Yes, hands; the cat had three-fingered hands and an opposed thumb.

When it got up about fifteen feet it tucked itself into a round ball and — I think *spun* is the word for it. I shook my head to

EMSH

clear it and looked again. There was no sign of the animal; there was only a speaker baffle I had not noticed before.

Speaker baffle?

Anyone who knows ultramodern knows there's a convention against speakers or lights showing. Everything has to be concealed or to look like something else.

"That," said the speaker in a sexless, toneless voice, "was more like it."

I backed away and sank down on the divan, where I could watch the baffle.

"Even if you are immune, I can get something out of you."

I said, "How do you mean immune?"

"There is nothing you wouldn't do," said the impersonal voice. "Now, when I make somebody do something he *can't* do — then I feed. All I can do with you is make you mad. Even then, you're not mad at yourself at all. Just the girl or the spider or whatever else."

I suddenly realized the speaker was not there any more. There was, however, a large spotted snake on the rug near my feet. I dived on it, and found in my hand the ankle of the girl I had seen before. I backed off and sat down again. "See?" she said in her velvet voice. "You don't even scare much now."

"I won't scare at all," I said positively.

"I suppose not," she said regretfully. Then she brightened. "But it's almost Saturday. *Then* I'll feed."

"What are you, anyhow?"

She shrugged. "You haven't a name for it. How could a thing like me have a name anyhow? I can be anything I like."

"Stay this way for a while." I looked her up and down. "I like you fine this way. Why don't you come over here and be friendly?"

She stepped back a pace, shaking her head.

"Why not? It wouldn't matter to you."

"That's right. I won't though. You see, it wouldn't matter to you."

"I don't get you."

She said patiently, "In your position, some men wouldn't want me. Some would in spite of themselves, and when they found out what I was — or what I *wasn't* — they'd hate themselves for it. That I could use," she crooned, and licked her full lips. "But you — you want me the way I am right now, and it doesn't matter in the least to you that I might be reptile, insect, or just plain hypocrite, as long as you got what you want."

"Wait a minute — this feeding. You feed on — hate?"

"Oh, no. Look, when a human

being does something he's incapable of, like — oh, that old biddy who clawed the pretty actress — there's a glandular reaction set up that's unlike any other. All humans have a drive to live and a drive to die — a drive to build and a drive to destroy. In most people they're shaken down pretty well. But what I do is to give them a big charge of one or the other, so the two parts are thrown into conflict. That conflict creates a — call it a field, an aura. That's what feeds me. Now do you see?"

"Sort of like the way a mosquito injects a dilutant into the blood." I looked at her. "You're a parasite."

"If you like," she said detachedly. "So are you, if you define parasitism as sustaining oneself from other life-forms."

"Now tell me about the immunity."

"Oh, that. Very annoying. Like being hungry and finding you have nothing but canned food and no opener. You know it's there but you can't get to it. It's quite simple. You're immune because you're capable of anything — anything at all."

"Like Superman?"

She curled her lip. "You? No, I'm sorry."

"What then?"

She was thoughtful. "Do you remember asking me what I was? Well, down through your history there have been a lot of names for such as I. All wrong, of course. But the one that's used most often is *conscience*. A man's natural conscience tells him when he's done wrong. But any time you see a case of a man's conscience working on him, trying to destroy him — you can bet one of us has been around. Any time you see a man doing something utterly outside all his background and conditioning — you can be sure one of us is there with him."

I was beginning to understand a whole lot of things. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"Why not? I like to talk, same as you do. It can't do any harm. No one would believe you. After a while you yourself won't believe anything I've told you. Humans *can't* believe in things that have no set size or shape or weight or behavior. If an extra fly buzzes around your table; if your morning-glory vine has a new shoot it lacked ten minutes ago — you wouldn't believe it. These things happen around all humans all the time, and they never notice. They explain everything in terms of what they already believe. Since they never believe in anything remotely resembling us, we are free to pass and repass in front of their silly eyes, feeding when and where we want. . . ."

"You can't get away with it. Humans will catch up with you," I blurted. "Humans are learning to think in new ways. Did you

ever hear of non-Euclidean geometry? Do you know anything about non-Aristotelian systems?"

She laughed. "We know about them. But by the time they are generally accepted, we'll no longer be parasites. We'll be symbiotes. Some of us already are. I am."

"Symbiotes? You mean you depend on another life-form?"

"And it depends on me."

"What does?"

She indicated the incongruous room. "Your silly friend Beck, of course. Some of the people who are attracted to the feeding-grounds here are operators — very shrewd. The last thing in the world they would ever do is to pass on investment secrets to anyone. I see to it that they tell Beck. And oh, *how* they regret it! How *foolish* they feel! And how I feed! In exchange, Beck brings them here."

"I *knew* he couldn't do it by himself!" I said. "Now tell me — why does he have me hanging around here all the time?"

"My doing." She looked at me coolly. "One day I'm going to eat you," she said. "One day I'll find that can-opener. I'll learn how to slam a door on you, or pound you with a flatiron, and I'll eat you like candy."

I laughed at her. "You'll have to find something I'll regret doing first."

"There has to be something." She yawned. "I have to work up a new edge to my appetite," she said lazily. "Go away."

"She's wrong," Hank said, when I'd finished telling him the story. He'd galloped over to my place when I called and just let me talk.

"Wrong how?"

"She said it was impossible for a human to believe this. Well, by God I do."

"I think I do myself," I said. Then, "Why?"

"Why?" Hank repeated. He gave a thoughtful pull to his lower lip. "Maybe it's just because I want to believe in any theory that keeps Opie clean — that makes what she did really out of character."

"Opie," I said. "Yes."

He gave me a swift look. "Something I've been thinking about, Tom. That night it happened — with Opie, I mean . . ."

"Spill it if it bothers you," I said, recognizing the expression.

"Thanks, Tom. Well . . . no matter what Opie was suffering from, no matter how . . . uh . . . willing she might have been — these things take time. You can see them happening."

"So?"

"*Where were you when that guy started making passes at her?*"

I thought. I started to smile, cut it off. Then I got mad. "I don't remember."

"Yes you do. Where were you, Tom?"

"Around."

"You weren't even in the room."

"I wasn't?"

"No."

"Who told you?"

"You did," he said. He began to get that sleepy look. "You're a lousy liar, Tom. When you duck a question, you're saying yes. Who was the babe, Tom?"

"I don't know."

"*What?*"

"I said I don't know," I said sullenly. "Just a babe."

"Oh. You didn't ask her her name."

"Guess not."

"And you raised all that fuss about Opie."

"You leave Opie out of this!" I blazed. "There's a big difference."

"You ought to be hung by your thumbs," he said pityingly. "But I guess it isn't your fault." He snorted. "No wonder that parasite of Beck's can't reach you. You don't do anything you regret because you never regret anything you do. Not one thing!"

"Well, why not?" I jumped to my feet. "Listen, Hank, I'm alive, see. I'm alive all over. Everybody I know is killing off this part of themselves, that part of themselves — parts that get hungry get starved, they die. Don't drink this, don't look at that, don't eat the other, when all the time something in you is hungry for these things. It's easily fed — and once it's fed it's quiet. I'm alive, damn it, and I mean to stay alive!"

Hank went to the door. "I'm getting out of here," he said in a shaking voice. "I got to think of my sister. I don't want you to get hurt. She might not forgive me."

He slammed the door. I kicked the end-table and busted a leg off it. The door opened again. Hank said, "I'm going with you to Beck's Saturday night. I'll pick you up here. Don't leave until I get here."

The front door at Beck's stood wide, as it always did on Saturdays. There was nothing to stop Hank or any other "graduate" from walking right in. Unless the something was inside those people. Hank sure felt it; I could tell by the way he jammed his hands in his pockets and sauntered through the door. He looked so relaxed, but he radiated tension.

It was the usual unusual type of party. Beck self-effacingly rode herd on about nineteen of the goofiest assortment of people ever collected — since last week. A famous lady economist. An alderman. A pimply Leftist. A brace of German tourists, binoculars and all. A dazed-looking farmer in store-clothes. Somebody playing piano. Somebody looking adoringly at the piano-player — she

obviously didn't play. Somebody else looking disgustedly at the piano-player. He obviously did play.

When we came in Beck hurried over, chortling greetings, which dried up completely when he recognized Hank. "Hank," he gasped. "Really, old man, I think —"

"Hiya, Beck," Hank said. "Been quite a while." And he walked out into the room and to the bar in the far corner, while Beck gawped like a bleached haddock. "Tom," Beck said, "you shouldn't have taken a chance like —"

"I'm just as thirsty as he is," I told him, and followed Hank.

I got a rye. "Hank."

"What?" His eyes were on the crowd.

"When you are going to quit the silent treatment and tell me what you have in mind?"

He looked at me, and the strain he was under must have been painful. "Hey," I said, "take it easy. Nothing's going to happen to you. Our hungry little friend here is an epicure. I don't think she's interested in anything but the first rush of anguish she kicks up. You're old stuff."

"I know," he muttered. "I know . . . uh . . . I guess." He wiped his forehead. "Do you see her?"

"No," I said. "But then, how would I know her if I did see her? Maybe she's not in the room."

"I think she is," he said. "I think she's stuck here."

"That's a thought. Hey! Her specialty is the incongruous — right? The out-of-character. Well, that's what this room is all about."

He nodded. "That's what I mean. And that's what I'm going to check on, but for sure. Here."

He moved close to the bar and to me, and quickly and secretly passed me something chunky and flat. "Hank!" I whispered. "A gun! What —"

"Take it. I have one too. Follow my cue when the time comes."

I don't like guns. But it was in my pocket before I could make any more talk. I wondered if Hank had gone off his rocker. "Bullets wouldn't make no nevermind to her."

"They aren't for her," he said, watching the crowd again.

"But —"

"Shut up. Tom," he asked abruptly, "does somebody always do something crazy at these shindigs? Every time?"

I remembered about the "investment" tips, the number of quiet, unnoticed times people must have done things in this room that caused them humiliation, regret. "Maybe so, Hank."

"Early or late in the proceedings?"

"That I don't know, Hank. I really don't."

"I can't wait," he muttered. "I can't risk it. Maybe it only feeds once. Here I go," he said clearly.

I called to him, but he put his chin down between his collarbones and went to the piano. I flashed a look around. I remember Beck's face watching Hank was white and strained.

Hank climbed right up on the piano, one foot on the bench, one foot on the keys, both big feet on the exquisite finish of the top. The pianist faltered and stopped. The ardent girl watching him squeaked. People looked. People rushed to finish a sentence while they turned. Others didn't even notice. After all — those parties of Beck's . . .

"Parasite!" Hank bellowed. And do you know, four-fifths of that crowd practically snapped to attention.

"He's not immune," Hank said. He was talking, apparently, to the place where the wall met the ceiling. "Here's your can-opener, parasite. Listen to me."

He paused, and in the sudden embarrassed silence Beck's voice came shakingly, stretched and gasping. "Get off there, you hear? Get —"

Hank pulled out his gun. "Shut up, Beck." Beck sat right down on the floor. Hank lifted his big head. "All he wants to do is live. He'd hate to die. But how do you suppose he'd feel if he killed himself?"

There shouldn't be silences like that. But it didn't last long. Somebody whimpered. Somebody shuffled. And then, in that voice I had heard here before, on the crazy day I saw the spider and the cat with hands, I heard a single syllable.

Starve a man for a day and a half, then put a piece of charcoal-crusted, juicy-pink steak in his mouth. Set out glasses of a rough red wine, and secretly substitute a vintage burgundy in one man's glass. Drop a silky mink over the shoulders of a shabby girl as she stands in front of a mirror. Do any of these things and you'll hear that sound, starting suddenly, falling in pitch, turning to a sigh, then a breath.

"M-m-m-m-m . . . !"

"You won't have long to take it, but it doesn't take long, does it?" asked Hank.

I thought, what the hell is he talking about? Who?

And then I pulled the gun out of my pocket.

Now I've got to talk about how much can run through a man's mind, how fast. In the time it took to raise the gun and aim it and pull the trigger, I thought:

It's Tom Conway he's been talking about to the parasite.

Hank wants the parasite to take me.

It's the parasite, not Hank,

not I, who is raising this gun, aiming it.

This is Hank's way to avenge himself on me. And why vengeance? Only because I think differently from him. Doesn't Hank know that to me my thinking is right and needs no excuse?

And it's a stupid vengeance, because it's on Opie's behalf, and surely Opie wouldn't want it; certainly it can't benefit her.

The gun was aimed at my temple and I pulled the trigger.

I'm alive, I'm alive all over. Everybody has to die sometime, but oh, the stupid, stupid, sick realization that you did it to yourself! That you let yourself be killed, that you let your own finger tighten on the trigger.

A gunshot is staccato, sharp, short. This was different. This was a sound that started with a gunshot but sustained itself; it was a roar, it filled the world. It roared and roared while the room hazed over, spun, turned on its side as my cheek thumped the carpet. The roar went on and on while the light faded, and through it I could hear their screams, and Hank's voice, distant but clear. "Everybody out! This place is going to blow skyhigh." "Fire!" he shouted a second later. "Fire!" And, "*Beck, damn you, help me with Tom.*"

Nothing then but a sense of time passing; then cool air, darkness, and a moment of lucidity. I saw too clearly, heard too well. Everything hurt. The roar was still going on as a background; I heard the gunshot, tasted it bitterly, saw it as a flickering aurora in and of everything around me, smelled it acrid and sharp — and felt it. I was on the gravel path, and frightened people poured out of the house.

"Stay with him!" Hank roared, and my head was cradled on Beck's trembling knees.

"But there is no fire — no fire," Beck quavered.

And Hank was a black bulk in blackness, and his voice was distant as he raced to the bushes. "Wait," he said. "Wait." He stooped back there, and there was a dull explosion inside the house, and another, and white light showed in the downstairs windows, turned to yellow, flickered and grew.

Hank came back. "There's a fire," he said.

Beck screamed. "You'll kill it!" He tried to rise. Hank caught his shirt and held him down.

"Yes, I'll kill it, you Judas!"

"You don't understand," Beck cried. "I can't live without it."

"Go back to your insurance company job. Make your own way, and don't harvest better people than yourself to feed monsters." Flames shot from the second-story windows. "But if

you really can't live without it — die," said Hank, and then he shouted, "Is everybody out?"

"All accounted for," called a voice. I remember thinking then that if they had counted heads and all were safe — who was that screaming in the fire?

After that even the roar stopped.

First pain, and then enough light to filter through my closed lids. I tried to move my right hand and failed. I opened my eyes and saw the cast on my right forearm. I turned my head.

"Tom?"

I looked up at the speaking blur. Then it wasn't a blur, it was Hank.

"You're all right now, Tom. You're home. My house.

I turned from him and looked at the ceiling, the window, then back to him. "You tried to kill me," I said.

He shook his head. "I used you for bait. I had to know if it was in that room. I had to know if it would feed. I had to know what it could do, what it would do. I tried to shoot the gun out of your hand. I missed, and hit your forearm. It's broken. Your bullet creased your scalp. It was awful close, Tom."

"Suppose I'd killed myself?"

He said, "Bait is expendable."

"You booby-trapped the house, didn't you?"

"After your blow-by-blow instruction in burglary, it was no trouble."

"You tried to kill me," I said.

"I didn't," he said with finality.

I wondered — I really wondered — why what I had done was that important. And it was as if Hank read my mind. "It's because of the difference between you and Opie," he said. "Superficially, you and Opie did exactly the same thing that night. But Opie's own feelings about it will cost her something for the rest of her life. And you didn't even remember who you were with."

I lay there like a block of wood. Hank went away. Maybe I slept. Next thing I knew, Opie was there, kneeling by the bed.

"Tom," she said brokenly. "Oh, Tom, I wish I were dead. Tom," she said, "I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you . . ."

I thought, I wish that thing, whatever it was, hadn't died in the fire. I know what I am now, I thought. I'm immune. And knowing that gives me enough anguish to feed the likes of you for a thousand years.

●

THE release of atomic energy is merely the most recent important step of that steady progression of science that is compelling man to become human.

— *Science Digest*

THE ALTAR

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

"Hello. Is this the West Ambrose police station? . . . My name is Mrs. Robert Slater. My husband failed to come home this evening and it's after nine o'clo — He couldn't have missed every *train, and besides, he would have telephoned me to — Don't be insolent! Robert has never taken a drink in his life!*

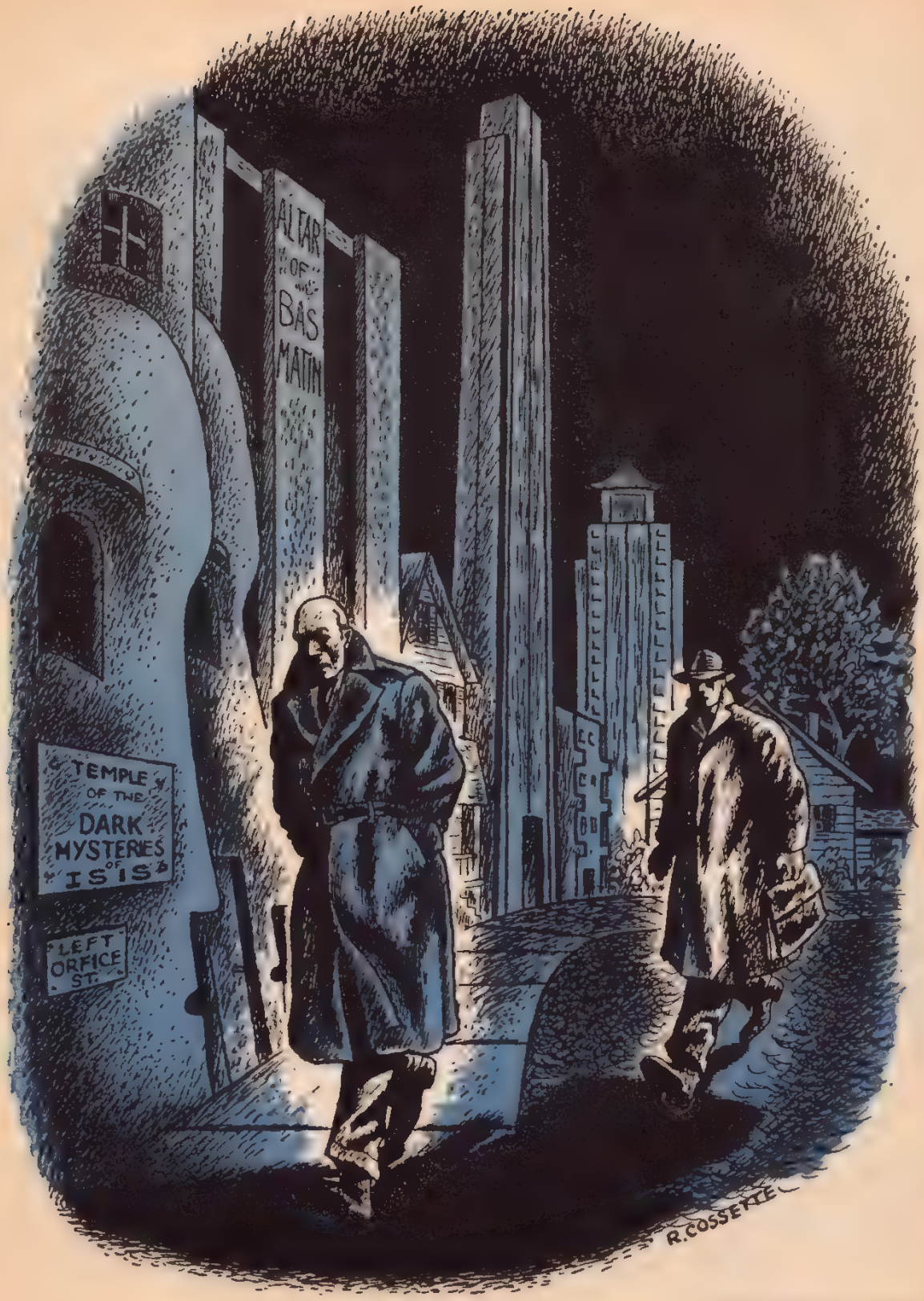
"Acting strangely? Well, as a matter of fact, he seemed a bit upset last night over some strange cults he says have moved into town. But I fail to see — Very well, please call me back."

With a sprightly gait, Mr. Slater walked down Maple Street toward the station. There was a little bounce to his step this morning, and a smile on his clean-shaven, substantial face. It was such a glorious spring morning!

Mr. Slater hummed a tune to himself, glad of the seven block walk to the railroad station. Although the distance had been a bother all winter, weather like this made up for it. It was a pleasure to be alive, a joy to be commuting.

Just then he was stopped by a man in a light blue topcoat.

"Pardon me, sir," the man said. "Could you direct



Illustrator: Ray Cassette

me to the Altar of Baz-Matain?"

Mr. Slater, still full of the beauties of spring, tried to think. "Baz-Matain? I don't think — the *Altar* of Baz-Matain, you say?"

"That's right," the stranger said, with an apologetic little smile. He was unusually tall, and he had a dark, thin face. Mr. Slater decided it was a foreign-looking face.

"Terribly sorry," Mr. Slater said, after a moment's thought. "I don't believe I ever heard of it."

"Thanks anyhow," the dark man said, nodded pleasantly and walked off toward the center of town. Mr. Slater continued to the station.

After the conductor punched his ticket, Mr. Slater thought of the incident. *Baz-Matain*, he repeated to himself as the train sped through the misty, ragged fields of New Jersey. *Baz-Matain.* Mr. Slater decided that the foreign-looking man must have been mistaken. North Ambrose, New Jersey, was a small town; small enough for a resident to know every street in it, every house or store. Especially a resident of almost twenty years standing, like Mr. Slater.

Halfway through the office day, Mr. Slater found himself tapping a pencil against the glass top of his desk, thinking of the man in the light blue topcoat. A foreign-looking fellow was an oddity in North Ambrose, a quiet, refined, settled suburb. The North Ambrose men wore good business suits and carried lean brown suitcases; some were fat and some were thin, but anyone in North Ambrose might have been taken for anyone else's brother.

Mr. Slater didn't think of it any more. He finished his day, took the tube to Hoboken, the train to North Ambrose, and finally started the walk to his house.

On the way he passed the man again.

"I found it," the stranger said. "It wasn't easy, but I found it."

"Where was it?" Mr. Slater asked, stopping.

"Right beside the Temple of Dark Mysteries of Isis," the stranger said. "Stupid of me. I should have asked for that in the first place. I knew it was here, but it never occurred to me —"

"The temple of what?" Mr. Slater asked.

"Dark Mysteries of Isis," the dark man said. "Not competitors, really. Seers and warlocks, fertility cycles and the like. Never come near *our* province."

"I see," Mr. Slater said, looking at the stranger closely in the early spring twilight. "The reason I asked, I've lived in this town a number of years, and I don't believe I ever heard —"

"Say!" the man exclaimed, glancing at his watch. "Didn't realize how late it was! I'll be holding up the ceremony if I don't hurry!" And with a friendly wave of his hand, he hurried off.

Mr. Slater walked slowly home, thinking. *Altar of Baz-Matain. Dark Mysteries of Isis.* They sounded like cults. Could there be such places in his town? It seemed impossible. No one would rent to people like that.

After supper, Mr. Slater consulted the telephone book. But there was no listing for Baz-Matain, or for The Temple of Dark Mysteries of Isis. Information wasn't able to supply them either.

"Odd," he mused. Later, he told his wife about the two meetings with the foreign man.

"Well," she said, pulling her house robe closer around her, "no one's going to start any cults in this town. The Better Business Bureau wouldn't allow it. To say nothing of the Woman's Club, or the P.T.A."

Mr. Slater agreed. The stranger must have had the wrong town. Perhaps the cults were in South Ambrose, a neighboring town with several bars and a movie house, and a distinctly undesirable element in its population.

The next morning was Friday. Mr. Slater looked for the stranger, but all he saw were his homogeneous fellow commuters. It was the same on the way back. Evidently the fellow had visited the Altar and left. Or he had taken up duties there at hours which didn't coincide with Mr. Slater's commuting hours.

Monday morning Mr. Slater left his house a few minutes late and was hurrying to catch his train. Ahead he saw the blue topcoat.

"Hello there," Mr. Slater called.

"Why hello!" the dark man said, his thin face breaking into a smile. "I was wondering when we would bump into each other again."

"So was I," Mr. Slater said, slowing his pace. The stranger was strolling along evidently enjoying the magnificent weather. Mr. Slater knew that he was going to miss his train.

"And how are things at the Altar?" Mr. Slater asked.

"So-so," the man said, his hands clasped behind his back. "To tell you the truth, we're having a bit of trouble."

"Oh?" Mr. Slater asked.

"Yes," the dark man said, his face stern. "Old Atherhotep, the mayor, is threatening to revoke our license in North Ambrose. Says we aren't fulfilling our charter. But I ask you, how can we? What with the Dionysus-Africanus set across the street, grabbing everyone likely, and the Papa Legba-Dambella combine

two doors down, taking even the unlikely ones — well, what can you do?"

"It doesn't sound too good," Mr. Slater agreed.

"That's not all," the stranger said. "Our high priest is threatening to leave if we don't get some action. He's a seventh degree adept, and Brahma alone knows where we'd get another."

"Mmm," Mr. Slater murmured.

"That's what *I'm* here for, though," the stranger said. "If they're going to use sharp business practices, I'll go them one better. I'm the new business manager, you know."

"Oh?" Mr. Slater said, surprised. "Are you reorganizing?"

"In a way," the stranger told him. "You see, it's like this —" Just then a short, plump man hurried up and seized the dark man by the sleeve of the blue topcoat.

"Elor," he panted. "I miscalculated the date. It's *this* Monday! Today, not next week!"

"Damn," the dark man said succinctly. "You'll have to excuse me," he said to Mr. Slater. "This is rather urgent." He hurried away with the short man.

Mr. Slater was half an hour late for work that morning, but he didn't care. It was all pretty obvious, he thought, sitting at his desk. A group of cults was springing up in North Ambrose, vying for congregations. And the mayor, instead of getting rid of them, was doing nothing. Perhaps he was even taking bribes!

Mr. Slater tapped his pencil against his glass topped desk. How was it possible? Nothing could be hidden in North Ambrose. It was such a little town. Mr. Slater knew a good percentage of the inhabitants by their first names. How could something like this go on unnoticed?

Angrily, he reached for the telephone.

Information was unable to supply him with the numbers of Dionysus Africanus, Papa Legba or Damballa. The mayor of North Ambrose, he was informed, was not Atherhotep, but a man named Miller. Mr. Slater telephoned him.

The conversation was far from satisfying. The mayor insisted that he knew every business in the town, every church, every lodge. And if there were any cults — which there weren't — he would know of them, too.

"You have been deluded, my good man," Mayor Miller said, a little too pompously to suit Mr. Slater. "There are no people by those names in this town, no such organizations. We would never allow them in."

Mr. Slater thought this over carefully on the way home. As he stepped off the train platform he saw Elor, hurrying across Oak

Street with short, rapid steps.

Elor stopped when Mr. Slater called to him.

"Really can't stay," he said cheerfully. "The ceremony begins soon, and I must be there. It was that fool Ligian's fault."

Ligian, Mr. Slater decided, would be the plump man who had stopped Elor in the morning.

"He's so careless," Elor went on. "Can you imagine a competent astrologer making a mistake of a week in the conjugation of Saturn with Scorpio? No matter. We hold the ceremony tonight, short-handed or not."

"Could I come?" Mr. Slater asked, without hesitation. "I mean, if you're short-handed —"

"Well," Elor mused. "It's unprecedented."

"I'd really like to," Mr. Slater said, seeing a chance to get to the bottom of the mystery.

"I really don't think it's fair to you," Elor went on, his thin, dark face thoughtful. "Without preparation and all —"

"I'll be all right," Mr. Slater insisted. He would really have something to dump in the mayor's lap if this worked! "I really want to go. You've got me quite excited about it."

"All right," Elor said. "We'd better hurry."

They walked down Oak Street, toward the center of town. Then, just as they reached the first stores, Elor turned. He led Mr. Slater two blocks over and a block down, and then retraced a block. After that he headed back toward the railroad station.

It was getting quite dark.

"Isn't there a simpler way?" Mr. Slater asked.

"Oh, no," Elor said. "This is the most direct. If you knew the roundabout way I came the first time —"

They walked on, backtracking blocks, circling, recrossing streets they had already passed, going back and forth over the town Mr. Slater knew so well.

But as it grew darker, and as they approached familiar streets from unfamiliar directions, Mr. Slater became just a trifle confused. He knew where he was, of course, but the constant circling had thrown him off.

How very strange, he thought. One can get lost in one's own town, even after living there almost twenty years.

Mr. Slater tried to place what street they were on without looking at the sign post, and then they made another unexpected turn. He had just made up his mind that they were backtracking on Walnut Lane, when he found that he couldn't remember the next cross street. As they passed the corner, he looked at the sign.

It read: Left Orifice.

Mr. Slater couldn't remember any street in North Ambrose

called Left Orifice. He was certain.

There were no streetlights on it, and Mr. Slater found that he didn't recognize any of the stores. That was strange, because he thought he knew the little business section of North Ambrose very well. It gave him quite a start when they passed one squat black building on which there was a dimly lighted sign.

The sign read: *Temple of the Dark Mysteries of Isis.*

"They're pretty quiet in there tonight, eh?" Elor said, following Mr. Slater's glance toward the building. "We'd better hurry." He walked faster, allowing Mr. Slater no time to ask questions.

The building became stranger and stranger as they walked down the dim street. They were of all shapes and sizes, some new and glistening, others ancient and decayed. Mr. Slater couldn't imagine any section in North Ambrose like this. Was there a town within the town? Could there be a North Ambrose by night that the daytime inhabitants knew nothing of? A North Ambrose approached only by devious turns through familiar streets?

"Phallic rites in there," Elor said, indicating a tall, slender building. Beside it was a twisted, sagging hulk of a place.

"That's Damballa's place," Elor said, pointing at it.

Toward the end of the street was a white building. It was quite long, and built low to the ground. Mr. Slater hadn't time to examine it, because Elor had his arm and was hurrying him in the door.

"I really must become more prompt," Elor muttered half to himself.

Once inside, it was totally dark. Mr. Slater could feel movement around him, and then he made out a tiny white light. Elor guided him toward it, saying in friendly tones, "You've really helped me out of a jam."

"Have you got it?" a thin voice asked from beside the light. Mr. Slater began to make out shapes. As his eyes became more accustomed to the gloom, he could see a tiny, gnarled old man in front of the light.

The old man was holding an unusually long knife.

"Of course," Elor said. "And he was willing, too."

The white light was suspended over a stone altar, Mr. Slater realized. In a single reflex action he turned to run, but Elor's hand was tight on his arm, although not all painful.

"You can't leave us now," Elor said gently. "We're ready to begin."

And then there were other hands on Mr. Slater, many of them, pulling him steadily toward the Altar.

THE MAN WHO LIKED DICKENS

Once upon a time, people used to read aloud to their friends. Almost any Sunday afternoon you could see some guy stretched out on the park grass, his head on a girl's knee while she ripped off a sonnet or two out of a thin volume by Shelley or Ogden Nash.

The custom died out in recent years, and we wondered why. But not any more, brother! Once we came across a certain chapter in Evelyn Waugh's novel, "A Handful of Dust," we wouldn't read out loud to the prettiest girl this side of Arapahoe, Nebraska!

"The Man Who Liked Dickens" is the chapter we mean. . . .

ALTHOUGH Mr. Todd had lived in Amazonas for nearly sixty years, no one except a few families of Pie-wie Indians was aware of his existence. His house stood in a small savannah, one of those little patches of sand and grass that crop up occasionally in that neighborhood, three miles or so across, bounded on all sides by forest.

The stream which watered it was not marked on any map; it ran through rapids, always dangerous and at most seasons of the year impassable, to join the upper waters of the river where Dr. Messinger had come to grief. None of the inhabitants of the district, except Mr. Todd, had ever heard of the governments of Brazil, of Dutch Guiana, both of which, from time to time claimed its possession.

Mr. Todd's house was larger

From A HANDFUL OF DUST, by Evelyn Waugh. Published by Little, Brown & Co. Copyright 1934 by Evelyn Waugh

than those of his neighbours, but similar in character — a palm thatch roof, breast-high walls of mud and wattle, and a mud floor. He owned the dozen or so head of puny cattle which grazed in the savannah, a plantation of cassava, some banana and mango trees, a dog and, unique in the neighborhood, a single-barrelled breech-loading shot gun. The few commodities which he employed from the outside world came to him through a long succession of traders, passed from hand to hand, bartered for in a dozen languages at the extreme end of one of the longest threads in the web of commerce that spreads from Manaos into the remote fastness of the forest.

One day while Mr. Todd was engaged in filling some cartridges, a Pie-wie came to him with the news that a white man was approaching through the forest, alone and very sick. He closed the cartridge and loaded his gun with it, put those that were finished into his pocket and set out in the direction indicated.

The man was already clear of the bush when Mr. Todd reached him, sitting on the ground, clearly in a very bad way. He was without hat or boots, and his clothes were so torn that it was only by the dampness of his body that they adhered to it; his feet were cut and grossly swollen; every exposed surface of the skin was scarred by insect and bat bites; his eyes were wild with fever. He was talking to himself in delirium but stopped when Todd approached and addressed him in English.

"You're the first person who's spoken to me for days," said Tony. "The others won't stop. They keep bicycling by . . . I'm tired . . . Brenda was with me first but she was frightened by a mechanical mouse, so she took the canoe and went off. She said she would come back that evening but she didn't. I expect she's staying with one of her new friends in Brazil . . . You haven't seen her have you?"

"You are the first stranger I have seen for a very long time."

"She was wearing a top hat when she left. You can't miss her." Then he began talking to someone at Mr. Todd's side, who was not there.

"Do you see that house over there? Do you think you can manage to walk to it? If not I can send some Indians to carry you."

Tony squinted across the savannah at Mr. Todd's hut.

"Architecture harmonizing with local character," he said, "indigenous material employed throughout. Don't let Mrs. Beaver see it or she will cover it with chromium plating."

"Try and walk." Mr. Todd hoisted Tony to his feet and supported him with a stout arm.

Illustrator: David Stone

"I'll ride your bicycle. It was you I passed just now on a bicycle, wasn't it? . . . except that your beard is a different colour. His was green . . . green as mice."

Mr. Todd led Tony across the hummocks of grass towards the house.

"It is a very short way. When we get there I will give you something to make you better."

"Very kind of you . . . rotten thing for a man to have his wife go away in a canoe. That was a long time ago. Nothing to eat since." Presently he said, "I say you're English. I'm English too. My name is Last."

"Well, Mr. Last, you aren't to bother about anything more. You're ill and you've had a rough journey. I'll take care of you."

Tony looked round him. "Are you all English?"

"Yes, all of us."

"That dark girl married a Moor . . . It's very lucky I met you all. I suppose you're some kind of cycling club?"

"Yes."

"Well, I feel too tired for bicycling . . . never liked it much . . . you fellows ought to get motor bicycles you know, much faster and noisier . . . Let's stop here."

"No, you must come as far as the house. It's not very much further."

"All right . . . I suppose you would have some difficulty getting petrol here. Never thought of that."

They went very slowly, but at length reached the house.

"Lie there in the hammock."

"That's what Messinger said. He's in love with John Beaver."

"I will get something for you."

"Very good of you. Just my usual morning tray — coffee, toast, fruit. And the morning papers. If her ladyship has been called I will have it with her . . ."

Mr. Todd went into the back room of the house and dragged a tin canister from under a heap of skins. It was full of a mixture of dried leaf and bark. He took a handful and went outside to the fire. When he returned his guest was bolt upright astride the hammock, talking angrily.

". . . You would hear better and it would be more polite if you stood still when I addressed you instead of walking round in a circle. It is for your own good that I am telling you . . . I know you are friends of my wife and that is why you will not listen to me. But be careful. She will say nothing cruel, she will not raise her voice, there will be no hard words. She hopes you will be great friends afterwards as before. But she will leave you. She will go away quietly during the night. She will take her hammock and her rations of farine . . . Listen to me. I know I am not clever but that is no reason why we should forget courtesy.

Let us kill in the gentlest manner. I will tell you what I have learned in the forest, where time is different. There is no City. Mrs. Beaver has covered it with chromium plating and converted it into flats. Three guineas a week with a separate bathroom. Very suitable for base love. And Polly will be there. She and Mrs. Beaver under the fallen battlements . . ."

Mr. Todd put a hand behind Tony's head and held up the concoction of herbs in the calabash. Tony sipped and turned away his head.

"Nasty medicine," he said, and began to cry.

Mr. Todd stood by him holding the calabash. Presently Tony drank some more, screwing up his face and shuddering slightly at the bitterness. Mr. Todd stood beside him until the draught was finished; then he threw out the dregs on to the mud floor. Tony lay back in the hammock sobbing quietly. Soon he fell into a deep sleep.

Tony's recovery was slow. At first, days of lucidity alternated with delirium; then his temperature dropped and he was conscious even when most ill. The days of fever grew less frequent, finally occurring in the normal system of the tropics, between long periods of comparative health. Mr. Todd dosed him regularly with herbal remedies.

"It's very nasty," said Tony, "but it does do good."

"There is medicine for everything in the forest," said Mr. Todd; "to make you well and to make you ill. My mother was an Indian and she taught me many of them. I have learned others from time to time from my wives. There are plants to cure you and give you fever, to kill you and send you mad, to keep away snakes, to intoxicate fish so that you can pick them out of the water with your hands like fruit from a tree. There are medicines even I do not know. They say that it is possible to bring dead people to life after they have begun to stink, but I have not seen it done."

"But surely you are English?"

"My father was at least a Barbadian. He came to Guiana as a missionary. He was married to a white woman but he left her in Guiana to look for gold. Then he took my mother. The Pie-wie women are ugly but very devoted. I have had many. Most of the men and women living in this savannah are my children. That is why they obey — for that reason and because I have the gun. My father lived to a great age. It is not twenty years since he died. He was a man of education. Can you read?"

"Yes, of course."

"It is not everyone who is so fortunate. I cannot."

Tony laughed apologetically. "But I suppose you really haven't

much opportunity here."

"Oh yes, that is just it. I have a great many books. I will show you when you are better. Until five years ago there was an Englishman — at least a black man, but he was well educated in Georgetown. He died. He used to read to me every day until he died. You shall read to me when you are better."

"I shall be delighted to."

"Yes, you shall read to me," Todd repeated, nodding over the calabash.

During the early days of his convalescence Tony had little conversation with his host; he lay in the hammock staring up at the thatched roof and thinking about Brenda. The days, exactly twelve hours each, passed without distinction. Mr. Todd retired to sleep at sundown, leaving a little lamp burning — a hand-woven wick drooping from a pot of beef fat — to keep away vampire bats.

The first time that Tony left the house Mr. Todd took him for a little stroll around the farm.

"I will show you the black man's grave," he said, leading him to a mound between the mango trees. "He was very kind. Every afternoon until he died, for two hours, he used to read to me. I think I will put up a cross — to commemorate his death and your arrival — a pretty idea. Do you believe in God?"

"I suppose so. I've never really thought about it much."

"I have thought about it a great deal and I still do not know . . . Dickens did."

"I suppose so."

"Oh yes, it is apparent in all his books. You will see."

That afternoon Mr. Todd began the construction of a headpiece for the negro's grave. He worked with a large spokeshave in a wood so hard that it grated and rang like metal.

At last when Tony had passed six or seven consecutive nights without fever, Mr. Todd said, "Now I think you are well enough to see the books."

At one end of the hut there was a kind of loft formed by a rough platform erected in the eaves of the roof. Mr. Todd propped a ladder against it and mounted. Tony followed, still unsteady after his illness. Mr. Todd sat on the platform and Tony stood at the top of the ladder looking over. There was a heap of small bundles there, tied up with rag, palm leaf and rawhide.

"It has been hard to keep out the worms and ants. Two are practically destroyed. But there is an oil the Indians make that is useful."

He unwrapped the nearest parcel and handed down a calf bound book. It was an early American edition of Bleak House.

"It does not matter which we take first."

"You are fond of Dickens?"

"Why yes, of course. More than fond, far more. You see, they are the only books I have ever heard. My father used to read them and then later the black man . . . and now you. I have heard them all several times by now but I never get tired; there is always more to be learned and noticed, so many characters, so many changes of scene, so many words . . . I have all Dickens books here except those that the ants devoured. It takes a long time to read them all — more than two years."

"Well," said Tony lightly, "They will well last out my visit."

"Oh, I hope not. It is delightful to start again. Each time I think I find more to enjoy and admire."

They took down the first volume of Bleak House and that afternoon Tony had his first reading.

He had always rather enjoyed reading aloud and in the first years of marriage had shared several books in this way with Brenda, until one day, in a moment of frankness, she remarked that it was torture to her. He had read to John Andrew, late in the afternoon, in winter, while the child sat before the nursery fender eating his supper. But Mr. Todd was a unique audience.

The old man sat astride his hammock opposite Tony, fixing him throughout with his eyes, and following the words, soundlessly, with his lips. Often when a new character was introduced he would say, "Repeat the name, I have forgotten him," or "Yes, yes, I remember her well. She dies, poor woman." He would frequently interrupt with questions; not as Tony would have imagined about the circumstances of the story — such things as the procedure of the Lord Chancellor's Court or the social conventions of the time, though they must have been unintelligible, did not concern him — but always about the characters. "Now why does she say that? Does she really mean it? Did she feel faint because of the heat of the fire or of something in that paper?" He laughed loudly at all the jokes and at some of passages which did not seem humorous to Tony, asking him to repeat them two or three times; and later at the description of the sufferings of the outcasts in "Tom-all-alones" tears ran down his cheeks into his beard. His comments on the story were usually simple. "I think that Dedlock is a very proud man," or, "Mrs. Jellyby does not take enough care of her children."

Tony enjoyed the readings almost as much as he did.

At the end of the first day the old man said, "You read beautifully, with a far better accent than the black man. And you ex-

plain better. It is almost as though my father were here again." And always at the end of a session he thanked his guest courteously. "I enjoyed that very much. It was an extremely distressing chapter. But, if I remember rightly, it will all turn out well."

By the time that they were in the second volume, however, the novelty of the old man's delight had begun to wane, and Tony was feeling strong enough to be restless. He touched more than once on the subject of his departure, asking about canoes and rains and the possibility of finding guides. But Mr. Todd seemed obtuse and paid no attention to these hints.

One day, running his thumb through the pages of Bleak House that remained to be read, Tony said, "We still have a lot to get through. I hope I shall be able to finish it before I go."

"Oh yes," said Mr. Todd. "Do not disturb yourself about that. You will have time to finish it, my friend."

For the first time Tony noticed something slightly menacing in his host's manner. That evening at supper, a brief meal of farine and dried beef, eaten just before sundown, Tony renewed the subject.

"You know, Mr. Todd, the time has come when I must be thinking about getting back to civilization. I have already imposed myself on your hospitality for too long."

Mr. Todd bent over the plate, crunching mouthfuls of farine, but made no reply.

"How soon do you think I shall be able to get a boat? . . . I said how soon do you think I shall be able to get a boat? I appreciate all your kindness to me more than I can say but . . ."

"My friend, any kindness I may have shown is amply repaid by your reading of Dickens. Do not let us mention the subject again."

"Well, I'm very glad you have enjoyed it. I have, too. But I really must be thinking of getting back . . ."

"Yes," said Mr. Todd. "The black man was like that. He thought of it all the time. But he died here . . ."

Twice during the next day Tony opened the subject but his host was evasive. Finally he said, "Forgive me, Mr. Todd, but I really must press the point. When can I get a boat?"

"There is no boat."

"Well, the Indians can build one."

"You must wait for the rains. There is not enough water in the river now."

"How long will that be?"

"A month — two months . . ."

They had finished Bleak House and were nearing the end of Dombey and Son when the rain came.

"Now it is time to make preparations to go."

"Oh, that is impossible. The Indians will not make a boat during the rainy season — it is one of their superstitions."

"You might have told me."

"Did I not mention it? I forgot."

Next morning Tony went out alone while his host was busy, and, looking as aimless as he could, strolled across the savannah to the group of Indian houses. There were four or five Pie-wies sitting in one of the doorways. They did not look up as he approached them. He addressed them in the few words of Macushi he had acquired during the journey but they made no sign whether they understood him or not. Then he drew a sketch of a canoe in the sand, he went through some vague motions of carpentry, pointed from them to him, then made motions of giving something to them and scratched out the outlines of a gun and a hat and a few other recognizable articles of trade. One of the women giggled but no one gave any sign of comprehension, and he went away unsatisfied.

At their midday meal, Mr. Todd said, "Mr. Last, the Indians tell me that you have been trying to speak with them. It is easier that you say anything you wish through me. You realize, do you not, that they would do nothing without my authority. They regard themselves, quite rightly in many cases, as my children."

"So they gave me to understand . . . and now if you have finished your meal perhaps we might have another chapter. I am quite absorbed in the book, you understand."

They finished Dombey and Son; nearly a year had passed since Tony had left England, and his gloomy foreboding of permanent exile became suddenly acute when, between the pages of Martin Chuzzlewit, he found a document written in pencil in irregular characters.

YEAR 1919

I JAMES TODD OF BRAZIL DO SWEAR TO BARNABAS WASHINGTON OF GEORGETOWN THAT IF HE FINISH THIS BOOK IN FACT MARTIN CHUZZLEWIT I WILL LET HIM GO AWAY BACK AS SOON AS FINISHED.

There followed a heavy pencil X and after it: MR. TODD MADE THIS MARK SIGNED BARNABAS WASHINGTON.

"Mr. Todd," said Tony, "I must speak frankly. You saved my life, and when I get back to civilization I will reward you to the best of my ability. I will give you anything within reason. But at present you are keeping me here against my will. I demand to be released."

"But, my friend, what is keeping you? You are under no restraint. Go when you like."

"You know very well that I

can't get away without your help."

"In that case you must humour an old man. Read me another chapter."

"Mr. Todd, I swear by anything you like that when I get to Manaos I will find someone to take my place. I will pay a man to read to you all day."

"But I have no need of another man. You read so well."

"I have read for the last time."

"I hope not," said Mr. Todd politely.

That evening at supper only one plate of dried meat and farine was brought in and Mr. Todd ate alone. Tony lay without speaking, staring at the thatch.

Next day at noon a single plate was put before Mr. Todd, but with it lay his gun, cocked, on his knee, as he ate. Tony resumed the reading of Martin Chuzzlewit where it had been interrupted.

Weeks passed hopelessly. They read Nicholas Nickleby and Little Dorrit and Oliver Twist. Then a stranger arrived in the savannah, a half-caste prospector, one of that lonely order of men who wander for a lifetime through the forests, tracing the little streams, sifting the gravel and, ounce by ounce, filling the little leather sack of gold dust, more often than not dying of exposure and starvation with five hundred dollars' worth of gold hung around their necks. Mr. Todd was vexed at his arrival, gave him farine and tasso and sent him on his journey within an hour of his arrival, but in that hour Tony had time to scribble his name on a slip of paper and put it into the man's hand.

From now on there was hope. The days followed their unvarying routine; coffee at sunrise, a morning of inaction while Mr. Todd pottered about on the business of the farm, farine and tasso at noon, Dickens in the afternoon, farine and tasso and sometimes some fruit for supper, silence from sunset to dawn with the small wick glowing in the beef fat and the palm thatch overhead dimly discernible; but Tony lived in quiet confidence and expectation.

Sometime, this year or the next, the prospector would arrive at a Brazilian village with news of his discovery. The disasters of the Messinger expedition would not have passed unnoticed. Tony could imagine the headlines that must have appeared in the popular press; even now probably there were search parties working over the country he had crossed; any day English voices must sound over the savannah and a dozen friendly adventurers come crashing through the bush. Even as he was reading, while his lips mechanically followed the printed pages, his mind wandered away from his eager, crazy host opposite, and he began to narrate to

himself incidents of his homecoming — the gradual re-encounters with civilization (he shaved and bought new clothes at Nanaos, telegraphed for money, received wires of congratulation; he enjoyed the leisurely river journey to Belem, the big liner to Europe; savoured good claret and fresh meat and spring vegetables; he was shy at meeting Brenda, and uncertain how to address her . . . "Darling, you've been much longer than you said. I quite thought you were lost . . .")

And then Mr. Tood interrupted. "May I trouble you to read that passage again? It is one I particularly enjoy."

The weeks passed; there was no sign of rescue but Tony endured the day for hope of what might happen on the morrow; he even felt a slight stirring of cordiality towards his jailer and was therefore quite willing to join him when, one evening, after a long conference with an Indian neighbour, he proposed a celebration.

"It is one of the local feast days," he explained, "and they have been making piwari. You may not like it but you should try some. We will go across to this man's home tonight."

Accordingly after supper they joined a party of Indians that were assembled round the fire in one of the huts at the other side of the savannah. They were singing in an apathetic, monotonous manner and passing a large calabash of liquid from mouth to mouth. Separate bowls were brought for Tony and Mr. Todd, and they were given hammocks to sit in.

"You must drink it all without lowering the cup. That is the etiquette."

Tony gulped the dark liquid, trying not to taste it. But it was not unpleasant, hard and muddy on the palate like most of the beverages he had been offered in Brazil, but with a flavour of honey and brown bread. He leant back in the hammock feeling unusually contented. Perhaps at that very moment the search party was in camp a few hours' journey from them. Meanwhile he was warm and drowsy. The cadence of song rose and fell interminably, liturgically. Another calabash of piwari was offered him and he handed it back empty. He lay full length watching the play of shadows on the thatch as the Piewies began to dance. Then he shut his eyes and thought of England and Hetton and fell asleep.

He awoke, still in the Indian hut, with the impression that he had outslept his usual hour. By the position of the sun he knew it was late afternoon. No one else was about. He looked for his watch and found to his surprise that it was not on his wrist. He had left it in the house, he sup-

posed, before coming to the party.

"I must have been tight last night," he reflected. "Treacherous drink that." He had a headache and feared a recurrence of fever. He found when he set his feet to the ground that he stood with difficulty; his walk was unsteady and his mind confused as it had been during the first weeks of his convalescence. On the way across the savannah he was obliged to stop more than once, shutting his eyes and breathing deeply. When he reached the house he found Mr. Todd sitting there.

"Ah, my friend, you are late for the reading this afternoon. There is scarcely another half hour of light. How do you feel?"

"Rotten. That drink doesn't seem to agree with me."

"I will give you something to make you better. The forest has remedies for everything; to make you awake and to make you sleep."

"You haven't seen my watch anywhere?"

"You have missed it?"

"Yes, I thought I was wearing it. I say, I've never slept so long."

"Not since you were a baby. Do you know how long? Two days."

"Nonsense. I can't have."

"Yes, indeed. It is a long time. It is a pity because you missed our guests."

"Guests?"

"Why, yes. I have been quite gay while you were asleep. Three men from the outside. Englishmen. It is a pity you missed them. A pity for them too, as they particularly wished to see you. But what could I do? You were so sound asleep. They had come all the way to find you, so — I thought you would not mind — as you could not greet them yourself I gave them a little souvenir, your watch. They wanted something to take back to England where a reward is being offered for news of you. They were very pleased with it. And they took some photographs of the little cross I put up to commemorate your coming. They were pleased with that, too. They were very easily pleased. But I do not suppose they will visit us again, our life here is so retired . . . no pleasures except reading . . . I do not suppose we shall ever have visitors again . . . well, well, I will get you some medicine to make you feel better. Your head aches, does it not? . . . We will not have any Dickens today . . . but tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that. Let us read Little Dorrit again. There are passages in that book I can never hear without the temptation to weep."

CONFIDENCE TRICK

(Continued from page 19)

looked around him, seeming to consider. Then his attention fixed itself on the Bank of England. He strode forward in a forceful manner and came to a stop facing the Bank, looked up. His lips moved.

The ground shook slightly underfoot. Three windows fell out of one of the Bank's upper storeys. One statue, two urns, and a piece of balustrading swayed and toppled. Several people screamed.

Mr. Watts squared his shoulders and took a deep breath.

"Good heavens! He's —" began Mr. Forkett, but the rest was lost as he sped from Henry's side.

"I —" announced Mr. Watts, at the top of his voice.

"DON'T —" he went on, to the accompaniment of an ominous trembling of the ground.

"BE —" but at that moment a strong push between his shoulder-blades thrust him full in the path of a hurtling bus.

There was a shriek of brakes applied too late.

"That's 'im! I sore 'im do it!" screamed a woman, pointing at Mr. Forkett.

Henry caught up with him just as a policeman came running.

Mr. Forkett was regarding the façade of the Bank with pride.

"No telling what might have happened. A menace to society, that young man," he said. "They ought to give me a medal, but I'm afraid they're more likely to hang me. After all, tradition must be observed."

DON'T TAKE IT TO HEART

(Continued from page 69)

dignity, but he shook with apprehension and dread — of something he couldn't recognize — as he lowered his rump to the stool.

He stood up immediately, sweating.

"I — can't!"

"Of course you can," Mr. Cahill said persuasively. "Sit down. There, that's a good fellow. Now take off her shoe. Her shoe, Mr. Grundy."

"My right foot's bigger than my left," she said. "That's the one I want fitted."

Grundy goggled at her in horror. "Your — right — foot?"

"You heard the lady," said Mr. Cahill. "The right foot first."

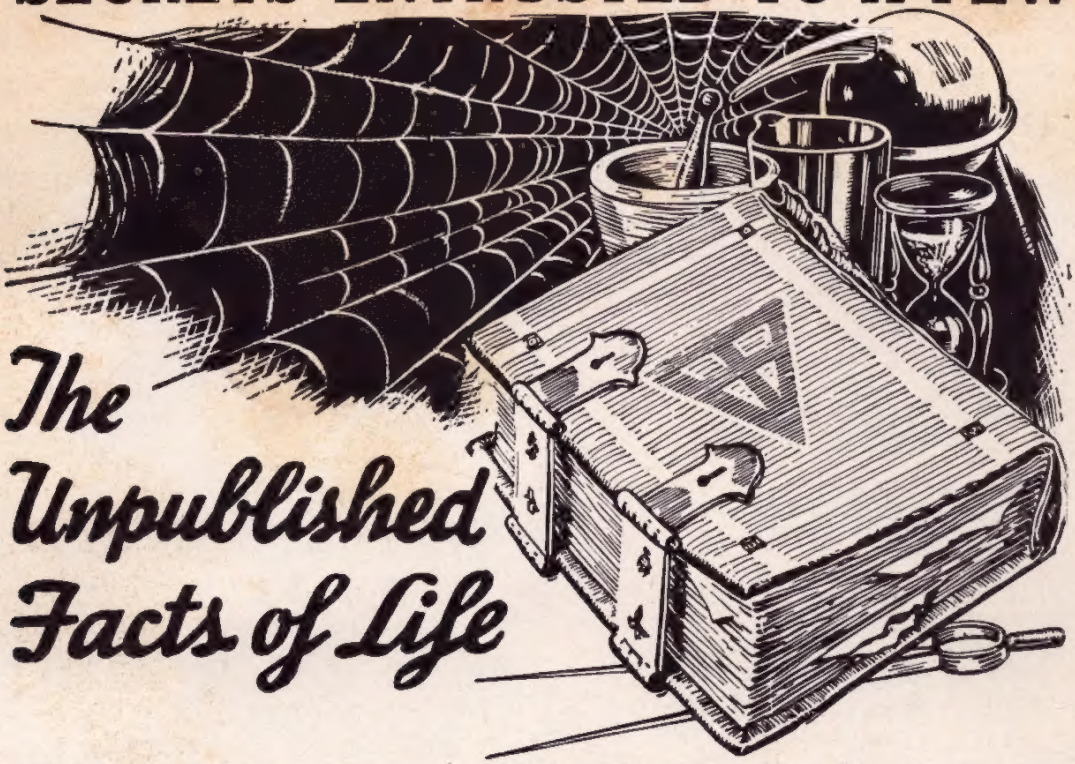
Grundy reached for it, but he drew back. "No!"

"Good Lord," Mr. Cahill exclaimed in exasperation. "The world won't end if you wait on a woman and try on the right shoe first!"

But, of course, it did.

As soon as Grundy had the right shoe off, the store collapsed, the city toppled, and the planet blew apart. There was only a moment to realize it, but he knew then why he'd been afraid to change his habits.

SECRETS ENTRUSTED TO A FEW



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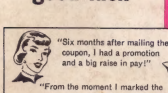

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